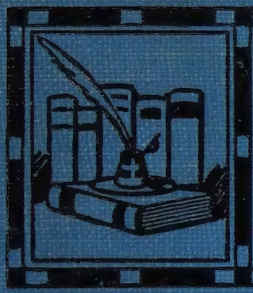

REX

E·F·BENSON

M. Howard Sleptsoff

Olympia Wash. 1925.

Woodlawn — June. 25

Rex

THE NOVELS OF

E. F. BENSON

REX

DAVID OF KINGS

DAVID BLAIZE

DAVID BLAIZE AND THE BLUE DOOR

MRS. AMES

THE OAKLEYITES

DODO THE SECOND

HODDER AND STOUGHTON
LTD. PUBLISHERS LONDON

REX

By E. F. BENSON

Hodder and Stoughton
Limited London

Made and Printed in Great Britain. Butler & Tanner Ltd., *Frome and London*

REX GOODWIN began regretfully to consider the propriety of getting home in time for the arrival of his father and mother. He did not personally see any propriety in such a proceeding, but was aware that his father would certainly observe and comment on the impropriety of his absence. He had spent a solitary and satisfactory day out here on the end of Roughton Point, bathing and basking in the sun, with spells of reading the volume of Ibsen plays which he had brought out with him. He read with fixed, definite purpose, caring little for the characters that somewhat sordidly emerged, but immensely interested in the move of their emergence and in the workmanship that with such lucid economy raised the solid structure of the plot. There was no touch of magic about these dreary Scandinavians: no thrill of beauty or enchantment hovered over the pages, and for his purpose it was better so, for that might have distracted his attention. As it was, he could devote himself exclusively to his conscious aim, which was to see 'how it was done.' The conceptions of character, and their presentments, the effective 'curtain,' the weaving of the various threads with each other till they formed the complete pattern, all these conformed to certain rules, which could be learned and followed.

There was a reason for all these things: the building

to stand at all must architecturally obey certain ordinances of dramatic construction. Rex was not content to observe the effect of such obedience ; he must puzzle out the decalogue itself. . . . Time-worn the decalogue might be, but it was still law, for the simple reason that the human mind has remained quite unchanged in its perception of what is dramatically interesting and exciting since the earliest days ; the suspense and satisfaction of aboriginal cavemen were of the same quality as that which rustled in the jewelled stalls to-day.

That had been his task, but there had been ample leisure as well, glorified by the delights of liberty and loneliness. All day the sea had been empty of ships, and the long sand-beaches of loiterers. At the back of the range of tumbled dunes behind him there were a few shanties and bungalows, but the students of bird-life and botany who inhabited them had not invaded his solitude, and he had bathed in this halcyon sea and basked on the sands with the sun hot on his browned shoulders till he was baked enough to bathe again, without having to resume the symbols of civilization. It was so much easier to think without shirt or trousers. . . .

Away to the left the shore bent round in a wide circle of untenanted sands till it came to the mouth of the Roughton estuary, a mile-broad sheet of water at high-tide, severing the promontory from the mainland, but at the half-ebb an expanse of shining mud-flats and shallow streams. To the right, straight as a ruled line, this long headland ran parallel with the North Sea, in low banks of shingle and scrub-covered marshy acres, a-bloom in these days of early September with the

pale purple of the sea-lavender, forming a breakwater three miles long between the estuary and the ocean. Along the margin of the sea the terns, black-capped and swallow-winged, passed in endless patrol, with heads bent down to sight their prey, diving every now and then into the shallow water and emerging with some small fish in their crimson bills. By the edge of the water, waiting for the spoils that the ebbing tide left behind, and the rising tide flung up, stood companies of the greater gulls, herring-gulls with the brown youngsters of the year, and black-backed gulls like grave assemblies of rochetted and surpliced bishops, with feet a-wash in the liquid rims of the ripples. But all these only added to the sense of solitude: if there had been a moving human being near them they would have risen and flapped their way to lonelier fields of provender.

Rex sat up, gathering his knees to his chin in the clasp of his extended arms for a few more moments' meditation before he put himself into his clothes, and his book and bathing-towel into his satchel. His hair had dried back into short black curls, and from under his straight eyebrows his wide grey eyes dwelt level and unfocussed on the sea which for the last hour had begun to creep back towards him over the sands. His ears that noticeably projected from the sides of his head, gave him something of a Faun-like aspect which was borne out by the lines of his mouth, which even in repose seemed half to smile, half to mock. But the chin which rested on his knees had nothing whimsical or woodland about it: it was the chin of a very determined young man, who seemed to know what he wanted, and was tranquilly determined to get it.

He wondered why he had found to-day so pre-eminently

delightful ; primarily no doubt it was because it was the last of his solitude, for this afternoon saw the return of his unnecessary parents, and the house and the hours would be governed by an inexorable routine. Rex was by no means a recluse, but he infinitely preferred his own company to uncongenial society, and he was aware that between him and his father there was some deep-rooted animosity. He did his best, though his best was of no very powerful quality, to drug this into somnolence, by always attempting a show of interest in his father's conversation and pursuits, but there was an antagonism of character which at the most could only be made to doze. Its somnolence was no deeper than the sleep of a dog : at any provocative noise the eyelids flickered and the ears were cocked ; sometimes it sprang into savage activity, growling and snapping. Such collisions were rare, but Rex had always been familiar with them. One of the earliest memories of his life was that of Mr. Goodwin finding him putting into his pocket a dozen matches from the box on his study table. There stood his father, gigantic in stature to a child's eye, thundering at him that he was stealing. By the code of his own consciousness, Rex was not doing anything of the kind : he was taking some of this brand of matches because they were lively explosive things, which blazed when rubbed on any rough surface, and required no box : as for their being private property, and therefore protected by moral law, such a notion had never entered his head.

He let his mind browse on that incident a little as he dressed, not with any conscious design of establishing an early justification for his own antagonism to Mr. Goodwin, but in order to recall his mother's part in it. She had heard the raised menacing voice, and hurrying

in, laid a hand on her husband's arm. "Francis, you're only frightening the boy," she said. "You will do no good that way." With the minute unfading memory of childish experiences, he knew that he had formed at that moment some alliance with his mother as deep-seated as the antagonism to his father. Just as the latter was in general intercourse covered and drifted-over by the mere social decencies without which their companionship would have been intolerable, so his alliance with his mother was often buried below his own youthful intolerance and impatience of the antiquated postures of the older generation. But he knew it to be alive and warm below that drifted snow of divergent sentiments and prejudices, even as below his efforts to get on with his father in daily intercourse the essential antagonism maintained a vigorous vitality.

He walked briskly back along the firm sands, for the tide was coming in apace, and he had to get across the flats of the estuary before the water grew too deep for wading; otherwise he must make a long circuit round the top of it. Then striking across the shingle at the top of the beach he followed his way over the fringe of marsh-land between tough springy bushes of suæda, to where the maritime meadows, covered only at the spring tides, were flushed with the pale purple of the sea-lavender. The sun was already low in its westering, and beyond the shining mud-flats over which the tide from the mouth of the estuary was beginning to creep upwards he could see the low hills of the mainland, stretching away to the woods of Halkin, and the brick-built village of Roughton with its lichened roofs mellowed to a smouldering red, climbing up the hillside to the great church that stood on the summit.

Here he had been born, here he had passed the holidays of the boyhood from which he was but just emerging, and some glittering tide of the sense of home swept over his heart. Estuary and hills and houses, some distilled essence of them, beat in his blood, and in spite of the many boredoms and frictions which were associated with the place, it was somehow anchored in him. He could imagine himself perfectly happy here without any ties save those which existed between him and it. . . .

And then his own mouth mocked, satyr-like, at himself and these Victorian sentiments. He would be finding himself whistling "Home, Sweet Home," if he was not careful, and with a jerk of that determined chin, he fell to thinking of the play which was beginning to take shape in his mind. The scribbling and study of that, now that his father would be at home, must be matters of secret industry; Rex could as soon let him know that he was attempting to write a play as have informed him that he was devising a burglary. Mr. Goodwin would recommend him not to "waste his time" over such frivolous pursuits, but devote the leisure of his holidays to some more useful hobby, or, if the news found him in a more genial humour, he might suggest that, as Rex was interested in the drama, they might read a play of Shakespeare aloud in the evening. But more likely, he would be altogether discouraging.

Somehow, too, it was impossible to tell his mother about it, not because she would be discouraging, but too volubly encouraging. She would want to know exactly all about it, what colour the heroine's eyes were to be, and what age the hero, unable to understand that at present he was just concerned with the lines and structure of it. She would want to have 'pieces' confided

to her: if he told her that he was studying Ibsen, she would instantly read *Hedda Gabler* or *Ghosts* and be visibly troubled because she found them 'horrid.' Besides, there would be no hero and heroine in his play; they would be ordinary muddle-headed people, in a difficult situation, who made a mess of their lives, as we all did, by reason of their stupidity, rather than their maliciousness. If he tried to explain that, she would counsel him to make them nicer. But at the thought of her, Rex's mouth ceased to mock, he loved her ineradicable desire that people should be nice, and could not raise a breath of cynicism about it. Her ideal world was full of people who were devoted to each other, and happy and clever and prosperous.

Rex paddled across the estuary over which the tide was now beginning to flow, and shuffled his feet into his shoes again, not delaying to put on his socks, and made his way along the grassy bank, which held the high tides from overflowing the low meadows beyond. Parallel to the bank on the side of the estuary lay the channel, now fast filling, which led to the quay of the village, where the fisher-boats were preparing to put out. The nets which all day had been drying on the grass were being stowed aboard, tawny sails were being hoisted, and slowly, against the tide with the help of the off-shore wind and punting-pole, the vessels were ruffling down the channel. But he was already late, and without lingering he hurried past the brick and flint houses on the edge of the quay to where the long low Georgian front of his home, flanked with leafy towers of elms, stood withdrawn behind its palings and lawn.

Just as he stepped into the porch, he saw through the open front-door that the hall-table was piled with coats

and small luggage : clearly then his father and mother had already arrived. This was annoying : he had taken the trouble to come back from the beatific beach in order to be in time filially to welcome them, and for all the good he had done, he might as well have stayed out and prolonged to the sunset the last of his days of liberty. Still, they could not have been here many minutes, and his intention might be regarded as an adequate substitute for the deed. Just then the drawing-room door opposite opened, and his father stood there.

Rex had outgrown the fear, which, as a child, he had felt for this rather formidable man ; what survived of it was a certain attitude of self-defence which he still instinctively adopted. He was not frightened of him any more, but he could not help mentally putting up his fists, half to guard himself, half to attack, if he was attacked.

"Well, Rex," said his father. "Your mother and I have arrived. We rather thought you would be here to welcome us."

Rex found himself bristling and the defensive fist clenched itself. The first greeting his father made was one of fault-finding. But he tried to put some apologetic cordiality into his voice as he answered.

"I'm a little late, I'm afraid, father," he said. "I came back from the beach in order to be here in time for your return. You can only just have come, have you ?"

Francis Goodwin let his eyes travel up and down the boy's figure, from his tumbled hair to his tie-less shirt open at the neck, and his bare feet showing below his turned-up flannel trousers. He hated untidiness whether in habit of mind or habit of dress, and without the slightest intention of making himself disagreeable could not prevent himself from uttering a small improving sentiment.

"Ah, just that ten minutes' dawdling which misses trains and appointments and chances in life," he said. "Five minutes to spare is so much better than five minutes late. Worth while cultivating punctuality, old boy, while you're young enough to form habits."

Rex took off his satchel.

"I came back as quick as I could," he said. "Is my mother in the drawing-room?"

The exhortation was not quite over yet.

"You'll go and make yourself tidy, won't you," said his father, "before you go and have tea with your mother."

Mrs. Goodwin had heard his voice and called to him from the drawing-room.

"I'll be down in a moment," he said. "Father tells me I had better go and make myself tidy first."

The antagonism had been seething, emitting minute little bitter bubbles. Rex strolled in a very leisurely manner off to his room, intending to take a superfluously long time in tidying himself. But it was without any intention at all that he had left his unbuckled satchel on the table, and from it protruded the volume of Ibsen. Francis Goodwin opened it, glanced at a page or two of the 'trash' (he knew that Ibsen was trash) and found Rex's name on the title-page.

He threw the book down again and with a shrug of his big shoulders went to his study, to look at such letters and businesses as might be awaiting his attention. He knew, with the same certainty as did Rex, of the essential antagonism which existed between his son and himself, but his appreciation of that frictional field differed widely from the boy's. Rex, as has been indicated, was given to regrets (mild they might be) for its existence, and to a general desire, amiable in that its object was for

peace and tranquillity, to forbear, unless goaded, from touching the sore surface. His father, on the other hand, felt perfectly sure that he was right to disapprove of and to correct the shortcomings which vexed him. Three already had glaringly presented themselves in Rex's brief appearance: so far from meeting them at the station (which evidently had not occurred to him at all), he had so protracted his lazy day on the beach, that he had lounged into the house, just as if they were some sort of insignificant guests, some time after their return. Then, when he appeared, he was half-dressed and slovenly, and had clearly intended to go and have tea with his mother in this scarecrow garb. Finally he had slung down an unbuckled satchel on the hall-table and left it there, thereby revealing that such mental effort as had been his to-day had been devoted to the study of this rubbish. All these betrayed disregard and disrespect for his parents: they were in themselves slight omissions and carelessnesses, but it was just such little things which showed the set of the undercurrent: they were not straws on the surface, but eddies coming from deep down. He did not accuse Rex of studied impertinences, but of a habit of mind to which disrespect was natural. That seemed to him as characteristic of the younger generation, as it was inconceivable in his own. He must make his mind clear to Rex before long about all this: he did not doubt that there would be ample opportunities for starting the subject. Apparently the boy thought that his father was just some convenient machine which, on the careless turning of a handle, dribbled out money for his support and education and the purchase of such rubbish as the satchel revealed. . . . And Rex had no business to speak to his mother

as he had done, calling out through the open door that his father wished him to make himself tidy before he presented himself. Then a thump on the floor in the room above, which was Rex's bedroom, showed that he had noisily kicked off a shoe.

Francis Goodwin glanced at the few letters that awaited him, and looked round his room to see that it was in the state of precise tidiness in which he had left it. There were but few pictures on the walls, for bookcases covered most of their area. These contained the medical library which he had amassed in his professional years, and to which now he often made additions. He had been a conscientious and careful practitioner rather than a brilliant one, and his industrious years had brought him a respected name and a fortune sufficient to enable him to repurchase this small estate, which had once belonged to his great-grandfather, and seek the leisure which his health, never very robust, had entitled him to. He had married at the age of forty, long after he had believed himself to be ear-marked for celibacy, a girl scarcely half his own age, the dowerless daughter of a country clergyman. For the first and only time in his life, this compact, self-centred man had been fairly routed from his own fortress; his years of unemotional industry had bided their time and laid a revengeful ambush for him, driving him forth from himself with this irresistible invasion of his heart. She had not, it would seem, been in love with him, and she had yielded, rather than known the imperious need of the one man: his tumultuous desire for her had swept her off her feet, even as it had swept him. Anything so strong and so menacingly sure of itself had something of the force of destiny about it, and Margaret

Ashton gave him herself, her beauty, her tenderness, the gay charm and sunshine of her, yet wholly without needing him. Devotion of mind and body, entire self-abandonment she could bring him, and these were his, but it was not till the birth of Rex that love dawned for her. Motherhood was her prime emotional need: all that concerned Rex was her passion, all that concerned her husband was a matter of her watchful and eager duty. That never slept in her nor lost one atom of its alert tenderness: when the fever of his adoration of her waned she nursed it the more sedulously. She had never come to him with the white-hot fire, but what was within her power she gave him, warmth and tenderness, and as the years went by the pity that is akin to love. She pitied him most for his implacable self-sufficiency and conscious uprightness. Just that one irresistible need for another—herself—he had experienced: that, like the wave following on some submarine explosion, had swept over his sea, but that had passed leaving him level and self-contained.

Well—it seemed that no sacrilegious housemaid had disturbed the orderliness of his study. No book was upside down or out of place, and he took the trouble of checking the correct sequence of a twelve-volumed set, to see that the numerals followed in due order. On the table by the window stood his microscope and the locked cabinet of slides: paper and envelopes were in the letter-case on his writing-table. And then in the little wooden bowl which stood by the blotting-book, and contained the occasional paraphernalia of elastic bands, sealing wax and clips, he saw that there was lying the stump of a smoked cigarette.

It was clear to him at once that Rex had been using his room, which represented itself to him as a piece of rank impertinence, and his use of this bowl as ash-tray for his cigarette-ends aggravated his offence. He emptied the débris out, fuming with indignation, and a charred mark on the inside of the bowl, and an elastic band burned through, showed that Rex had just chucked the stump there without even quenching it. In the deliberate search for other evidence he opened his blotting-book and found half a dozen sheets of writing paper scrawled over in Rex's slovenly handwriting. He had not even used the complete sheet : the first side and the fourth were scribbled over : then he had taken a fresh sheet.

Francis Goodwin began to decipher the pages : one was headed Act I, and there followed the description of a room : another seemed to be a piece of dialogue between two characters designated by initials. This then was how the boy had been employing himself in his absence, and this threw a side-light on to the volume he had discovered in Rex's satchel. He had enjoyed a month's complete holiday already, since he had come down from Cambridge, and before Mr. Goodwin had gone away for this week's visit with his wife, he had expressed a wish equivalent to an order that Rex should begin some serious work in view of his entering a solicitor's office in London next October. Instead he had been making free of his father's room, using fine good writing paper for his scribblings and dropping cigarette ends into sacred receptacles. That was all characteristic of the young generation who treated their parents with mild indulgence and frank impertinence, and in particular it was characteristic of Rex. He should speedily learn that this particular parent was not quite a back-number

yet, but, on the other hand, singularly capable of asserting himself.

Rex, meantime, already in a state of suppressed ferment over his father's small strictures, had carried out his suggestion as to making himself tidy before he had tea with his mother with a completeness that had the intention of irony about it. He had been out all day on the beach, and his condition of tie-less shirt, his tumbled hair, and his unsocked feet, so he told himself, was a perfectly reasonable one in which to greet his mother, and make the inroads on to the tea-cake which his long lunchless day demanded. What did she care whether he had socks on or not, or whether his hair was unbrushed? Still, if his father desired decoration, he was perfectly willing to comply, and he had come downstairs again in black-coated propriety, with a clean starched shirt and hair immaculately orderly.

Her heart leaped to him as he entered, and then came blank surprise.

"Ah, my darling," she said. "It is nice to see you again, Rex. But, my dear, why so beautiful? Black coat, stiff collar; what does it all mean?"

He threw an arm round her neck, surprised at the pleasure he felt.

"Oh, it's good that you're back," he said, "though I confess I've been extremely happy alone. But I do like you so much."

"That's a sweet word to me," said she, kissing him.

"As for my clothes," said he. "What happened was that I came in all no-how as usual, and, as I told you, father thought I had better make myself tidy. That's all. He also warned me against the dangers of dawdling."

Some shadow crossed the brightness of her grey eyes.

They were marvellously sensitive, every flicker of emotion recorded itself there. They were set rather wide apart, just as Rex's were : his colour was hers too and his height. But not from her did he get that determined jaw and chin.

"Oh, my dear, was he vexed with you ? " she said.

"A bit ; about the same as usual," said Rex.

"What a pity ! Do try to please him, it's so easy. I hate his being vexed with you, or you with him."

"Well, you shan't find anything to hate if I can help it," said he.

She gave a little sigh : already that day she had been treated to a somewhat gloomy analysis of Rex's nature, and certainly she did not like this obviously ironical assumption of clothes fit for a wedding. But the mere presence of Rex blew the clouds away for the present.

"Now tell me exactly all you've been doing," she said. "I thought of you so often, and hoped you weren't feeling lonely and bored."

Rex's mouth mocked at himself.

"I'm never bored when I'm alone," he said, "because I'm there."

"The conceit of him ! " said his mother.

"Well, you're not bored when I'm there," said Rex, "so why should I be ? And I'm not bored when you're there, if it comes to that."

"Rex, what compliments ! But you don't tell me what you've been doing."

"Bathing, lying on the beach, playing golf, thinking," said Rex. "Also reading."

"That's good, your father will like that."

"Not very much, if he knew what I've been reading."

"Not your law-work then ? "

"Haven't touched it. I was too busy."

Her eyes lit up with eager interest.

"Oh, my dear, what have you been busy about? Aren't you going to tell me?" she asked.

Rex reconsidered his determination not to tell her about the play. She already knew the nature of his private ambitions, and he could warn her that no details were forthcoming: she must be warned too, that on no account must the slightest hint of it reach his father.

"Well, I've really begun to write a play," he said. "Sketched it out, that is, and had a shot at the opening dialogue, and other bits here and there. I can't tell you anything more about it yet: it would only sound crazy and unintelligible. But it's coming all right: there's something stewing in the pot."

"Oh, Rex, take off the lid for a minute. Do let me peep in."

"I simply can't," said he. "I should have to begin explaining that there was a woman who had a husband who—who—oh, it would be sheer nonsense."

"I'm sure I could understand," said she. "I should love to know about it. I want to discuss it all with you."

Rex's chin became slightly more prominent.

"But that's just it," he said. "I can't discuss it. I know my plan, and I know what my people are like. You might want them to be different, and if I tried to make them different, it would be another play, not this one. By the way, father must never know a word about it. He would think it an awful waste of the seed-time of life. As for all the reading I've done, it has been entirely Ibsen."

Some vague trouble crossed her forehead.

"Oh, my dear, those dreadful people!" she said. "I read *Ghosts* once; I thought it absolutely horrid."

He knew it would be like this and repented having told her anything. But he felt he had to go on now to justify his study.

"Oh, perfectly horrid," he said, "from one point of view. But that's only the material of the play, which doesn't concern me. What concerns me is how it's done. Given the plot, there was never any play more dramatically developed."

She was all eagerness to catch at his point of view. It was because it was his that it mattered.

"Yes, I see what you mean," she said. "It's the method, I see. But why write about such dreadful things? It made me feel perfectly sick."

Rex found himself bridling his impatience.

"Yes, but that's not the point," he said.

"But surely the story is the point of the play."

Rex jumped up.

"I left the volume I had been reading to-day on the hall-table," he said. "I must get it. I don't want to leave it about."

Before he got to the door, it was opened from outside and Mr. Goodwin looked in. It was a grim face that appeared there. He held in his hand the volume which Rex was about to retrieve.

"I should like to speak to you, Rex, when you've finished your tea," he said. "Please come to my study."

His eyes travelled up and down Rex's immaculate figure and he remembered having told him to make himself tidy. That was another instance of the boy's impertinence and merited recognition.

Rex waited till his father had closed the door again.

"Then I shall have some more tea," he said. "I thought I had finished, but I haven't. It's far

pleasanter talking to you, mother, than being talked to."

She made a gesture of entreaty.

"Oh, my dear, don't keep him waiting: it will only vex him more. Rex, it makes me miserable when you have rows with your father. Go now, dear. I shall wait for you here and then perhaps you'll take me a stroll before dinner."

Rex smiled without mockery, and kissed her.

"Affecting scene," he said. "Prisoner on the verge of execution embraces his aged mother. The corpse will take a nice walk with you presently. It's about that Ibsen, I expect. I hope father hasn't been reading *Ghosts* too."

Rex was prepared for a hostile reception. He was aware of the irony of his fine clothes, and made no doubt that his father was aware of it as well. Then there was Ibsen . . . he could not for the moment think of anything else. But as soon as he entered he knew that there was plenty more. Idiot had he been to leave those scrawled sheets in his father's blotting-book! Some days ago he had sat here attempting unsuccessful openings for his first act, and when he found a happier inspiration the memory of those discarded sheets had entirely slipped from his mind. Certainly he had no more business to use his father's private study than he had to sleep in his bedroom: he was quite prepared to acknowledge that, and, though it was hard to see the harm of it, to apologize as amply as was required. And then instantly, as by infection, he felt resentment and antagonism begin to bubble.

Francis Goodwin was sitting at his writing-table. Rex's scribbled sheets were laid neatly by his elbow, and the Ibsen was open before him. He did not look up at Rex's entry.

"Sit down, Rex," he said, and turned the page. For a couple of minutes he read on, then pulled a dozen leaves from the book, tore them across and threw them into the waste-paper basket. The mutilated volume followed.

"What did you pay for that book?" he asked.

Rex's eyes were bright with the cold glitter of dislike. His anger was rising fast, and it was of that dangerous quality which does not break out and overflow, but remains stored and still and potent, directing operations.

"I think it was seven and sixpence," he said. "I can't remember about discount."

"That's sheer impertinence," said his father.

"Excuse me, but it is nothing of the kind. You asked me the price of the book, and I wished to give it you as accurately as I could."

"You meant it impertinently."

"I meant it in self-defence," said Rex.

"Explain that, please."

"I wished to guard myself against being accused by you on some future occasion of not being accurate. That was my reason."

Rex felt he had scored there. Unless his father directly told him that he lied, there was no rejoinder possible.

"Remind me then to give you the price of it when we have had our talk. It was your property, but I must tell you that this is my house, and I don't choose that it should be the receptacle for such indecent muck as I have found there. I should be ashamed to have such a book on my shelves."

Rex remained silent, waiting for further development. His father's action with regard to his book seemed to him deliberately provocative and he was alert for any

opening. Consciously now he set himself to be provocative too.

His silence seemed to answer the purpose.

"I have addressed some observations to you, Rex," said Mr. Goodwin.

"I heard them. But if I answered them sincerely you would probably call me impertinent again. I thought it best to be silent. But my silence, I am afraid, is not satisfactory either. If you want an answer it is this. To destroy a book which belongs to me is treating me like a child. I am at liberty to read any book that I choose. If you disapprove of my choice, you should tell me so with civility, instead of destroying my book."

"Anything else?" said his father.

"Several things. To read a few pages of *Ghosts*—I think it must have been *Ghosts*—does not make you capable of judging Ibsen. And it isn't as if I had left the book lying about in your study. It was packed away with my towel in my satchel. I suppose you took it out, and I don't see that you have the smallest right to do that. You knew the satchel contained things of mine. I shouldn't look in your drawers to examine your things and destroy them if I didn't approve of them. And with regard to the price of that book I prefer not to accept it. I make you a present of it."

His father pushed his chair back, shaking with anger. What enraged him most was the knowledge that Rex, disrespectfully though he had expressed himself, was perfectly right in his comments.

"Hold your tongue," he snarled at him.

"That was my original intention," said Rex.

Mr. Goodwin walked across to the window and stood

there with his back to the room, making a strong effort at self-control. His temper, though easily roused, was, unlike Rex's, violent in its manifestations. A spot of high colour burned in his cheeks, his breath quickened, and he could hear his heart creaking and beating in his throat. This scene of recrimination had not been in the least what he contemplated. He had not meant to tear Rex's book like that; it had been an improvised and obviously unfortunate way of expressing his mind about the pages he had glanced through, and having done it, he had intended his question about the price of the book to show the boy that though angrily contemptuous of the 'muck,' he meant to be scrupulously fair towards him. Then had followed Rex's remark about discount, and from that point on his anger had glowed and blazed till it was like some conflagration that completely surrounded him. And there sat Rex calmly and carefully insolent, without a tremor of annoyance in his voice, speaking to him as to an equal. Fathers and children were equal, were they, in these new days? He might have something to say to that.

He stood there a long while in silence, controlling the violent disorder of his anger, and telling himself that it would be far wiser to stop this horrid business at once, and not speak to Rex on the subject for which he had bidden him here, until he was in better mastery of himself. In the interval, too, he could talk quietly to Margaret about it. He knew, sometimes with bitterness and jealousy, to which of them her heart was anchored, but she was wise and her devotion to him was unquestionable. She hated this atmosphere of feud between him and his son; a clear-sighted emollient

reasonableness was hers which soothed and persuaded. It was on the tip of his tongue to make some suggestion in accordance with this, when Rex spoke again.

"If that's all you've got to say to me," he observed, "I will leave you. I said I would take my mother for a stroll before dinner."

Instantly his anger flared again. Rex no doubt would give her his version of this interview, and the thought was intolerable. He swung back into the room again, and stood by the fireplace.

"I am not aware that I have said anything to you yet," he remarked. "At present I have been listening to your criticisms of me. I have now got a matter for your consideration. The long and the short of it is that I do not intend to be treated by you with the disrespect and impertinence which you seem to consider the proper attitude of a son to his father. In the future you will please remember that, and when I express my desire that you should do a thing, you will neither disobey me, nor obey me insolently."

Rex stretched out an arm and contemplated the black sleeve and the stiff white cuff.

"I see you understand me with regard to that point," said his father. "I told you to make yourself tidy before you went to have tea with your mother. You therefore dressed yourself up in an absurd manner in order to mock me. If I am wrong tell me so."

Rex raised his eyebrows, but made no reply.

"So much for that then," said his father. "Take care you do not do it again. Now when I went away last week I told you that you had already had a good long holiday, and that I expected you to begin your reading for the law. Have you done any?"

"Not a word," said Rex.

"I thought so. Now your mother told me that some friend of yours from Cambridge was coming to stay with us in a week's time. If you are decently industrious in the interval, he shall come. If not, you will have to put him off. What is his name?"

"Oliver Barnard," said Rex.

"Very well. Whether he comes or not depends entirely on yourself. I wish you to put in a couple of solid hours a day. You quite understand?"

"Perfectly," said Rex.

"Now I take it that instead of working, as I desired you to do, you have been reading what lies in my waste-paper-basket, and attempting to write a play on your own account. For that purpose you have been using my room, which I am not aware I invited you to do, and dropping your cigarette-ends among my writing-things. Your scribblings you left in my blotting-book where I found them."

Rex had intended to apologize for his intrusion. Now no nether-millstone would have ground any expression of regret from him.

"Have you anything to say to that?" asked his father.

Rex shrugged his shoulders ever so slightly.

"If you want me to reply, I will," he said. "But I am equally willing not to."

Mr. Goodwin saw himself as a parent, inflexibly firm but scrupulously fair.

"I wish to hear anything you have got to say for yourself," he said.

"It's not so much about what I have done," observed Rex. "It's about what you have done. You found some pages in your blotting-book which you saw were

written by me. You proceeded to read them, else you couldn't have known I was trying to write a play. That's all. I don't wish to make the slightest comment on it."

Once again his anger gripped Goodwin like an attack of fever. But now he sufficiently realized the unwisdom of further speech.

"You can go, Rex," he said. "For the future you will render me respect and obedience."

Rex got up and without looking round walked to the door. He knew his father was waiting for any sign that he accepted or acknowledged the reasonableness of his conclusion. Just and reasonable it was: his imagination put himself in his father's place, and his father in his, and without demur he allowed that his father was perfectly right. But at the moment Rex disliked him too much to give him his due, and he liked his own power of irritating him too much to forgo a jot of it. His father no doubt had the whip-hand of him in material ways, his only counter-weapon was his own power of showing him that this constituted a very imperfect mastery. He guessed, furthermore, that behind his father's anger and antagonism, some force of fatherhood tormented him; through this he could wound his father as well as anger him. No sense of sonship was his, fear and self-defence and dislike had long drowned that, even if it had ever existed. Never from his earliest days onward had he felt any sense of comradeship with him: once he had been appalling and omnipotent, now he was merely disagreeable.

Rex paused outside the door. There was really something rather dramatic in the situation. It would be good

practice to write some such dialogue as he and his father had held.

Chapter II

REX had no opportunity for his proposed stroll with his mother. He went to the drawing-room where he had left her, and seeing her out in the garden at the back of the house, was just going out to join her, when he heard the long window of the study thrown open and his father's voice calling her. It was clear that she was to receive the first account of the interview from him.

Rex had not the slightest objection to this: he was rather diverted by the fact of his father's so intentionally securing the first word with her, for he had known that she and Rex had planned a stroll together. . . . Well, he had certainly given them something to talk about, and after that his mother would be sure to want to know his version of it all, and that was vastly more effective than his father's. He had kept his temper, he had not spent it in agitation, and random assaults, but had winged little telling darts with it: anger carefully controlled, he was sure, made them fly true, and added to their power of penetration. Probably now his mother was soothing and binding up those smarting little wounds. She was a wonderful nurse of sorenesses and abrasions. . . .

The Satyr in him was amused but also exasperated. It was really intolerable that his father should come shoving and jostling like this, treading on his toes and digging a sharp elbow into him. It was such a senseless, rude intrusion: he had been so busy and contented with his books and his bathings and his dreams till his

father had come blundering into the middle of them. He was like a great blue-bottle who ought to have been quietly hibernating now that his summer was over: instead he came buzzing out, dashing himself into your lamp, and hitting you in the face, and settling on the book that you were reading, or on the back of your neck. To hit at him only seemed to encourage his activity, and very likely in the process you dropped your book or overturned your lamp. And for all his buzzings and blind excursions, he accomplished nothing: or rather he accomplished exactly the opposite of what he had intended, for if anything could have strengthened Rex's resolve to study the drama, and write a play, it would have been precisely that futile mutilation of his volume of Ibsen. À propos of that, there was just time to catch the evening post, and Rex scribbled a note to his bookseller to send him at once another copy of the volume.

He went out to post this at the office in the street that climbed up from the quay. The tide was full now, lapping the roadway, and the estuary was brimmed with shining waters. Down in the west where the sun, already sunken, turned the hills to amber and the sky to sheets of rose-blossom, the water blazed with the pink reflection: nearer, the sky was delicate green, and the estuary like pale patinated bronze; eastwards the dim blue of it seemed as remote as the sky itself. Remote, too, to Rex now was that sense of home which had been so vivid to him this afternoon. This disturbance had driven in like bitter mist between him and the perception of it, and he drew the conclusion that his father, anyhow, had not much to do with the home-sense. What right had people got to go messing up his mind like this? What about Oliver, too, and the

threatened prohibition on his visit? It would be rather a score to write to Oliver himself and say that his father was making himself odious and the house generally resembled a charged Leyden jar which might give you a shock. So instead wouldn't Oliver come down and stay at the village inn? It was quite comfortable and Oliver, lucky dog, had as much money to throw about as he wished. They could be together all day and Rex would dine at the inn every evening. He might even go and stay there, which would be a crowning stroke. The devoted Oliver, he knew, would jump at the notion of being with him in any circumstances.

Rex debated whether he would not hurry back and scribble a line to Oliver to this effect. Then suddenly he pictured to himself with that swift-etching imagination of his, in what sort of impossible place his mother would be beleaguered by those smart tactics. They seemed humorous and effective to him, but she, poor darling, would have to be endowed with a very superlative sense of fun if she was to appreciate them. There she would be while Rex airily absented himself all day and perhaps all night with the forbidden friend, watching her husband in the pillory which Rex had contrived for him. Decidedly it would not do; he must give up this subtle manœuvre, designed so justly to irritate, for the net that entangled the one of them involved the other in its crafty meshes. He could not deliberately execute a plot, however gratifying in itself, which would strike at her. He could imagine the sort of time she would have with his father, if he went and stayed with the ostracized Oliver at the village inn.

He supposed then that he would have to spend a couple of hours a day over that weary law-work if he

intended, as he assuredly did, that Oliver should stay with him, for his father was undoubtedly capable of carrying his threat into execution. He would write some pompous pedantic letter to Oliver or his mother, explaining the circumstances, just as if Rex was still a small boy who could be sent to bed, or docked of his jam at tea. That was his father's attitude to him all over: neither his mother nor himself had, in his view, an independent existence. They were his satellites, made to revolve on the orbits he appointed for them. Rex did not accuse his father of any arbitrary demands on him: they were perfectly consistent and unvarying, and exacted from him punctuality, industry, respect. But these demands were made as from Sinai surrounded by thunder-clouds, which boomed and blazed when the decalogue was not undeviatingly obeyed. When things went well, and transgressions were absent, a benevolent eye certainly looked out sometimes from the rifts in the clouds, but its benevolence might at any moment be obscured again. There was always the sense of insecurity: Rex was never at ease with his father, simply because he had to take care, and walk warily. Well, he must walk warily, otherwise Oliver would be prohibited, and his mother would go about looking troubled and anxious, and make little plaintive appeals to him. That got on his nerves, but it was not wholly nor indeed essentially for that reason that he chafed under it. He was genuinely fond of her, all the tenderness of which he was capable was at her service. She deserved all the happiness and tranquillity that he could procure for her. What a delightful week she and Oliver and he could spend, if only Sinai with its thunder-clouds was not there to menace them and keep them careful.

Something had clearly happened when Rex appeared rather late for dinner. Ordinarily, even on quite serene days, unpunctuality provoked a little homily, with some tedious story about Napoleon or Mr. Gladstone, who attributed their success in life to the fact that they were always up to time. He saw, as he entered, a swift glance of appeal from his mother towards the head of the table, as if to remind his father of something that had already passed between them, and Mr. Goodwin looked up at him with a cordial welcome.

"There you are, my dear boy," he said. "You'll be hungry after your long day out."

Rex was quite as ready to respond to any advances on his father's side, as he was to be alert for attack.

"I am," he said. "I didn't take any lunch with me."

"Indeed? Why was that?"

Rex perceived that it would be tactless to say that his bathing-towel and his book made a full satchel, considering what tragic part the book had played in the day's proceedings.

"I forgot it," he said. "The thought of lunch is not very vivid immediately after breakfast. Besides, I don't think I really intended to stop out for lunch."

His father laughed.

"That's a record even for you, Rex," he said, "to intend to come back to lunch, and be late for tea."

Here was slightly dangerous ground again, and his father bustled off it with extraordinary agility.

"After all there is a great deal to be said for having just two meals a day, breakfast and dinner," he said. "When I was at Cambridge there was no such thing as lunch, beyond a biscuit or a sandwich. To be sure one

dined earlier : breakfast at eight and dinner at six was the custom then. You got five solid hours at your books in the morning, then there was time before dinner for a good walk ; none of your strolls, mind you, but a full four and a half miles an hour with elbows squared, and fair heel and toeing. Then after dinner there was a glass of port in some friend's room, and a couple of hours more work from nine to eleven before bed. I kept up the two-meal day, too, till I married, and then I succumbed to your mother's delicious lunches and teas."

Rex, astonished at these amiable trifles, was almost inclined to question whether this suavity was not analogous to the centre of calm which abides in the heart of a cyclone, and whether they would not presently be engulfed in the howling tempest again. As a rule his father, in the domestic circle, had no dealings with such small change of conversation and sociability, but sat silent unless he had something of solid interest to himself to communicate, or found it his duty to criticize the topics of the others. But his mother's tranquillity and cheerfulness seemed to argue that no return of the cyclone need be expected : evidently the tempest was overpast, and no doubt it was her wand which had dispersed it. Mr. Goodwin, when dinner was done, stayed but a few minutes in the drawing-room, and then went off to his study, to clear off arrears of correspondence which had accumulated in his absence. This was obviously part of the plan, for as soon as he had gone, his wife pursued it.

" I want to talk to you, Rex," she said. " I told your father I meant to."

Rex grinned.

" But what have you done to him, mother ? " he asked. " I never saw anything like it. You'd have thought

that I had been a model of industry and punctuality. I suppose he told you about it all."

Mrs. Goodwin had realized that Rex would probably be far more difficult to deal with than his father. The latter was swift to flare up and to find fault, unable to allow for the careless indifference of youth, but the other in reality was far harder.

"Now, my dear, we've got the evening to ourselves," she said. "I'm going to bully you to my heart's content."

Rex sat down by her.

"I know your brutal ways," he said. "You might be my stepmother. Will father come in here again, do you think? If not, I shall smoke."

"Oh, don't do that, Rex," she said. "He does not like anyone smoking here. We'll go and sit in your room if you like."

Rex put back his cigarette case.

"No, it doesn't matter," he said. "Now what do you want to bully me about?"

"You know quite well. Let's get down to it at once. Rex, you don't realize one atom how pathetic your father is."

Rex certainly had not thought of that.

"About as pathetic as an ironclad," he remarked.

His mother laid her hand on his knee.

"Oh, Rex! Who is the ironclad in this house?" she said. "You."

"Me? I'm much more like the cabin-boy. Sort of Casabianca: I'm always standing on a burning deck."

Her eyes twinkled at first, but became grave again.

"That's not quite sincere, darling. You don't think of yourself in the least as a cabin-boy."

"No, but he does," said Rex. "I was trying to be

sympathetic, you see. You've often told me I'm not sympathetic enough. I was seeing myself from his point of view."

She smiled again, diverted for the moment at this defensive agility.

"My dear, you would make a retort if you were going to be hanged next moment," she said.

"Well, hang me. That's what you're out to do."

"That's another retort. Oh, you will write such delicious dialogue in your play."

Rex interrupted.

"These compliments are meant to put me in a good temper," he said. "Don't bother about that: I am in a good temper."

"I'm glad of that. Now your father has told me all about your row with him. I think he has put it fairly; at least, it all sounded extremely probable."

"Particularly my enormities," said he. "But did he tell you that before I had said a single word, he tore some pages out of my Ibsen and threw it into the waste-paper basket?"

"Yes. He thinks he was quite wrong to do it."

Rex's smile mocked above that determined chin.

"That's a good beginning," he said. "There's actually one point on which father and I are agreed."

"Let's find another, then," said she. "He thinks you put on your smart new clothes in order to make fun of him."

Rex checked this off on his fingers, radiantly concurring

"That makes two," he said. "You won't find the third. But I want to know where the pathos comes in."

"Oh, my dear: you're so quick-minded and yet you don't see that! Can't you see that he hates these eternal disagreements with you? He wants to be good friends

with you, and you won't let him. Isn't that pathetic enough ? "

Rex shook his head.

" It won't do," he said. " Ever since I can remember him at all, he has always been on the look-out for something to correct and badger me about. It's an odd manner of showing that you want to be friends with anyone. He would like me to be a different kind of fellow altogether. I dare say that if he could hammer me into some new mould of his own, he would be prepared to be friends with me. But he has a lot of hammering to do first. And frankly, I don't like being hammered. It doesn't hurt, but it's a bore ; it makes a row."

" He sees that : I feel sure he sees that," said she. " He wants to stop hammering, as you call it."

" I call it hammering, because it is hammering," said Rex. " As for his seeing it, and wanting to do differently, what that means is that you've been soothing him and appealing to him, and pointing out that it doesn't do any good. I could have told him that years ago, but it would have been impertinence and there would only have been more hammering. And why doesn't he stop hammering if he's so keen to ? I've never tried to stop him stopping. Who wants him to go on except himself ? Besides he has hammered, as I said, as long as I can remember. He's produced his atmosphere all right, and when you've done that you can't blow it all away in a second."

Rex spoke without the slightest anger, in that low rather husky voice which was so like his mother's.

" He dislikes me," he said, " and I'm sure I don't wonder. I should dislike myself immensely if I was in his place and had his nature. He may love me and all that, but he doesn't like me."

Mrs. Goodwin neither denied nor assented to this.

"And yet he's not pathetic, Rex?" she asked.

"No; he's merely illogical. All my life he has been down on me for this or that or nothing at all, and he expects me to be a dutiful, loving, respectful son. It's utterly unreasonable. He can coerce me into doing certain things he wants; for instance, he has threatened not to allow Oliver to come here, unless I am very industrious all this week. He can do that, and he certainly will, unless he's satisfied with me. But I can't be expected to like him for it. We dislike each other, and I really can't imagine how it can be otherwise, and while I'm dependent on him, he has got the whip-hand of me. He likes knowing that. I know it too, but I don't like it. He doesn't recognize that I have any independent existence. To him, I am his son and nothing else at all. But I am: I am myself."

She paused. It was just as pathetic to her big heart that Rex should feel as he did, as that his father should so utterly miss the way that led to friendship and a happy relation between them. Yet, if she had hinted that Rex, to her perception, was pathetic too, he would have stared at her in utter incomprehension.

"You miss so much by feeling like that, dear," she said at length.

"I can't agree with you. There isn't anything to miss. Father doesn't like me."

"But he wants to," said she. "I don't deny that he has often been injudicious and unwarrantably stern with you. But now—oh, Rex, it is pathetic—he is afraid that you won't let him like you. You're very hard: you're much harder than he is."

"Oh, it's all my fault then, I suppose," he observed.

"My dear, that's childish," she said. "You don't mean it, and you know it isn't what I mean. How can I convince you that your father not only misses obedience and respect in you, but affection? It's the worst sort of starvation to want affection and not to get it."

"But how am I to give what I haven't got?" demanded Rex. "And how on earth can I suppose that he wants my affection? You tell me so, because he's told you so. There's no evidence."

Mrs. Goodwin found that her eyes were brimming, and, impatient with herself, mopped them with her handkerchief. She had not wanted to use the appeal of her own unhappiness over the relation between the two who meant the world to her. She wanted Rex to see her point of view, not because it concerned her happiness, but because he felt it for himself. She straightened herself up.

"My dear, I apologize to you for crying," she said. "I didn't mean to, it just happened. But it shan't happen again."

Rex laid his hand on hers, suddenly softened.

"Poor mother!" he said. "What a hell of a time I give you."

She smiled at him.

"Yes, my dear, but if I didn't love you, you couldn't give me a hell of a time. I shouldn't care. And how much better to love you and have a hell of a time, than be without both."

"Well, give me a kiss then to show that you love me, and another to show you forgive me for being hellish. There! Now go on with your bullying. What do you want to torture me into doing?"

"My darling, I've told you," said she. "I want you to be less hard with your father, to meet him half-way

He won't say he has been wrong: he's like that. He can't say it. But if you find him trying to be friends with you, trying not to find fault with you, let him see you appreciate it. He's got an awfully sharp temper, but then you've got a fiendish one yourself. He gets hot and angry: you get cold and angry. Try to please him, dear: you will find it quite a pleasant change."

Rex laughed.

"That's a nasty one," he said. "Any more like that?"

"Yes, dear, any amount. You never do anything because it will please him, but only because you want to avoid the inconvenience of displeasing him. And there is so much difference between the two. One is love, the other is—well, I think it's selfishness."

"Lord! You do make me out a devil," observed Rex. "Go on: be practical. Give instances of what you want me to do."

"You will find hundreds for yourself. For instance, the sort of thing he would like would be if you dusted your law-books to-morrow morning—I'm sure they want it—and asked if you might come and work in his study, in order to be quiet and undisturbed."

"Machiavelli," observed Rex.

"Yes; being what you are, I thought that would appeal to you."

"Talk of retorts!" said Rex.

"Well, will you try?" she asked.

"Yes, of course, if you want me to."

"Oh, Rex, that's a delightful reason for you to give me," said she. "But it's not the reason I want."

"Conduct, dear brethren," said Rex, in precisely the tones of the Vicar of Roughton, "is three parts of life."

"What a monstrous doctrine! Intention is three

parts of life. And I think it's the fourth as well."

"My intentions are strictly honourable," said Rex. "But I can't mend my reason for them. . . . And I want to smoke."

There was a room opposite his father's, known as Rex's room, a comfortable little parlour, where smoking was permitted, and here he betook himself. It was unlikely that he would be disturbed, but in case of that, he took down one of his law-books, and seating himself at the writing-table, spread a sheet of foolscap in front of him, on which he jotted down a note or two. That, if his father came in, would please him, and pending that he brought out from a drawer the scenario at which he was working, which could, on the sound of a footstep, be easily stowed away again. But before getting to work, he thought over this interview with his mother. He was quite prepared to make the attempt she wanted, not only for the sake of her comfort but because, superficially, it seemed sensible. He certainly did not enjoy these everlasting frictions, and if a reasonable obedience and respect was likely to produce corresponding amenities from his father, he was quite willing to do his share. But the idea that the intention to please could produce ease or friendliness did not seem in the least probable. It might make a smooth veneer in place of the rough surface, but below the veneer there was still that solid structure of dislike. His father, he told himself, was responsible for that, and any crack in the veneer would cause it to show through again. The process recommended was a sort of Coué-ism : he had to behave as if he liked his father, and then, so ran the prescription, he would get to do so. As for his father

being pathetic, that was a tender, feminine view, with all the unreality of sentimentalism. She saw in his father desires and yearnings which Rex did not believe were his. . . . It was a meaningless ritual that they should behave as if friendliness or intimacy existed between them : it was as if she wanted a couple of agnostics to read versicles and responses. . . . However, if they kept their eyes off each other, they would not make missiles of their prayer-books. Rex grinned to himself at the image which thus presented itself, and took the scribbled sheets of his play from the table-drawer.

All his attention instantly fastened itself on his work : his mind leaped across the disturbances which had interrupted him, and pounced on the point over which he had been engaged when he reluctantly began to dress on the beach this afternoon. He wanted to consult somebody about it : how would a woman feel under these circumstances ? It was a pity that his mother could not advise him, but the situation would trouble her ; she would think they were all very unballasted, unprincipled people. So they were : that was just the point of it, but to her the point would be obscured behind clouds of morality. Luckily Oliver was coming next week : he had an extraordinary feminine flair about such things. Rex had often told him that though he disliked women in general he knew precisely how they felt. Women, on the other hand, adored Oliver, they said he was such a dear and so understanding, and they consulted him about the colour of their hats and ribands.

An idea flickered somewhere in the back of his mind, and he sat alert but very quiet, not grabbing at it, but waiting for it to develop itself. Ah, that was it, and he lost himself again in the finding of it. The clock on the

chimney-piece chimed, and he said to himself it was only eleven and then suddenly he heard a door shut, and a step sound in the passage immediately outside. Some subconscious part of him must have been alert for that, for instantly, with a muffled exclamation of impatience, he swept his pages into the drawer and drew Blackstone towards him. Then the door opened, and his father, candle in hand, stood there.

"Rex, are you up still?" he said. "I thought I saw a light under your door. It's very late: it's past twelve."

Rex got up.

"Is it really?" he said. "I had no idea of it."

His father came across to the table, looked at the open book and the half-page of scribbled notes. He laid his hand on the boy's shoulder.

"My dear fellow!" he said. "But shut up your books now, won't you, and go to bed? Working late, when the brain wants sleep, takes it out of one. A couple of hours before breakfast when you're fresh are worth gallons of midnight oil."

"I should like to finish what I'm at," said Rex, thinking of the play. . . .

"Well, a quarter of an hour more at the outside," said Mr. Goodwin. "Good night, old boy."

Rex pulled open his drawer again as soon as he heard his father's footsteps on the landing upstairs. He wondered, amusedly, what his mother would have wished him to do, whether to stick to this splendid manifestation of intention, or tell him that he had not been working at his law-books at all. But for himself, he had no doubt that honesty would have been far the worse policy.

Rex found the next day or two extremely trying:

an average allowance of friction would have been more enjoyable, though there was certainly an admixture of rueful comedy in the situation. He took his books to his father's study directly after breakfast, on the rehearsed plea of finding uninterrupted quietness there, and got the most cordial of welcomes. His father cleared the table in the window of the microscope and the box of slides, and then, most astounding of all, brought to him the scribbled sheets which he had discovered in his blotting-book yesterday afternoon. That indeed was a magnanimous beating of the spear into the pruning-hook, and Rex recorded that though his father was primarily pleased with him, he was hardly less pleased with himself. Then after an hour, by way of a relaxation in their studies (Mr. Goodwin was engaged on a paper on the obscure function of some ductless gland), he proposed a stroll in the garden to "clear the cobwebs from their brains," and urged on Rex the value of the golden hours before breakfast.

"There's just that momentary disinclination to get up," he said. "But with a one, two, three, there you are on your feet and you don't want to get back into bed again. Then just a dash into your cold tub and you're brisk enough for anything. Make yourself a cup of tea and eat a biscuit with it, and you'll find after a couple of hours that you've got a rare appetite for your breakfast, and you've broken the back of your day's work already."

Rex simulated a clumsy appreciation of this scheme, and his father pressed it further.

"I'll rap at your door, Rex, to-morrow morning," he said, "when I get up. I'll warrant you'll be wondering by breakfast-time why you haven't got up at six every

morning of your life. You'll have done your two hours' work, which is ample for your holiday time, and there'll be the whole day free. . . . Well, I'm freshened up again: nothing like a short break in a morning's work to whet your keenness. Let's go back to our books."

This deadly project was duly carried out next morning, and Rex, who hated the early morning, shambled drearily downstairs about half-past six. It was no good going to bed early in preparation: six o'clock had an essentially detestable quality about it. Besides, he disliked going to bed early: the evening hours from ten to twelve were just those when his brain was most alive. . . . His father had already made tea for them both, but when Rex, slightly restored, lit a cigarette and a second from the stump of the first, his father intervened again.

"I shouldn't smoke before breakfast if I were you," he said. "It's good for nobody. And you'll find you enjoy your after-breakfast cigarette twice as much, for not having smoked before."

Half an hour later Rex with the unconsciousness of habit lit a third. Mr. Goodwin with the same unconsciousness of habit said:

"I thought we had agreed not to smoke any more before breakfast."

Rex could not quite let that pass.

"Sorry, father," he said. "I forgot you told me not to."

But nine o'clock, though long-tarrying, arrived at last, and Rex, who for the last hour had been planning a day that should atone for this dreary *séance*, closed his books and notes. His day's task was done, and

directly after breakfast, with a sandwich and his towel, and probably the missing volume of Ibsen which ought to arrive by the morning's post, he would go off to the delectable beach and pass an amphibious and meditative day. If he was quick he could get across the ford before the flow rendered it too deep to wade; if he was already rather late, he could strip to his waist, and flounder through. There would be no thought of coming back for tea: the tide was late now in the afternoon, and he would have a real day's escape. He could even think kindly of the last few hours, which had procured him this boon. . . . And there, beside his plate, was a letter from Oliver, and, what mattered more, the neat tight parcel from his bookseller.

His mother was already at the table: Rex kissed her.

"Oh, Lord, what a morning," said he, "and all for your sake. Don't touch my shoulders, mother: they're sore with sprouting wings. Hurrah, they've sent me another copy of my volume of Ibsen, unaccountably missing. May I have a sandwich and an apple, please, and you won't see me till dinner-time. I shall spend the whole day——"

His father followed in similar good spirits. Rex hastily folded up his Ibsen again. . . .

"Well, we've had a splendid spell of work, Rex and I," he said. "He's a convert already to early rising, I'll be bound. What gorgeous weather! Hot as July still, and a spice of wind off the sea. Upon my word, I've done a good day's work already, and I'll make a holiday of the morning."

Rex's face fell under a ghastly apprehension, as his father walked across to the window and looked out at the state of the tide.

"There'll be enough water to row or sail across to the Point by eleven," he said. "We'll take a boat, Rex, and go across for a dip and we can get back here for lunch if your mother will put it off till two."

Rex caught her quick glance. Appeal was there, and entreaty. Really, this was much worse than the ordinary frictions. He knew what it would mean, a wearisome sail with his father at the tiller, and himself receiving instruction: a dip in the sea, a huddling on of clothes, and a long row back against the tide. And it was impossible to refuse this treat, this strenuous, boring festival. . . .

"Oh, that will be ripping," he said joylessly.

Then came a further ironical happening, but sweetened, even to Rex's goaded sense, by comedy. His father's post was on the sideboard, and he stood there opening it. Then he turned to Rex with a book in his hand.

"That volume of yours, old boy," he said with a smile, "which got mislaid," and he held out to him another copy of the Ibsen plays. . . .

The morning passed in accordance with Rex's gloomiest forebodings. He knew considerably more about the estuary than his father, and once, when Mr. Goodwin told him to loose the sheet as he was going to put about, Rex said, "There's shallow water in there, father. You'd better not put about yet." For that he got a snapped-back answer.

"Just do as you're told, Rex," said the other.

Rex did as he was told, and presently they were aground.

"You should have been more brisk," said his father.

"We should have gone aground just the same," said Rex. "You ought to have held your course for another quarter of a mile."

"Just push off," said Mr. Goodwin. He knew he was wrong, but to be put right by Rex . . .

Then came the bathe. Mr. Goodwin swam out for a hundred yards against the flow of the tide, came racing back, and next minute was vigorously towelling himself. Rex meantime was kicking his way lazily along, turning on his back to float, and was just beginning to realize that liquid unity with the sea, which is the joy of bathing, when he heard himself called, and rolling over shorewards, saw his father already dressed.

"Time to come out, Rex," he shouted. "We shall keep your mother waiting for her lunch."

"Oh, damn: keep *him* waiting is what the man means," muttered Rex.

The tide had begun to ebb while they were still far out, and a stern spell of rowing awaited them. They took it in turns to scull, and Mr. Goodwin, who, forty years ago, had rowed for his college at Cambridge, instructed Rex how to feather, and get a good leg-drive. "A long smooth stroke takes you twice the distance of those jerks at the water," he said. "Remember what I told you about your wrists."

Rex arrived back dripping with exertion. And but for this treat, he would now be floating and muddling about in the water, or basking naked on the sands with scribbling pencil and the sun hot on his shoulders, with the whole golden afternoon in front of him.

And where in the name of all that was flat and unprofitable was the use of it all? His father and he, so Mr. Goodwin irresponsibly asserted, had had a splendid morning, refreshing and invigorating, a good sail, a good

bathe and a good row. But, then, that was his father's notion of enjoyment, and Rex's notion of hell . . . Rex, so the new approach to friendship demanded, must enjoy himself in his father's way : get up early, and for reward spend a perfectly intolerable morning, and spoil his day. It did not in the least conduce to ease and friendliness ; it did not heal a situation, but only concerned itself, at the cost of an acme of irritation and sense of wasted time, with the symptoms of it. It was as if a doctor thought to cure scarlet-fever by covering the rash with chalk. . . .

Rex's splendid morning had reduced him at lunch to a silence that verged on sullenness. Smouldering with irritation, he went out into the garden, where he established himself in a sequestered shade, invisible from his father's window, and tried to set to work on his play again. But nothing went right : he wanted the sea and the solitude, and presently his mother joined him.

" Not interrupting you, Rex ? " she asked.

" Nothing to interrupt," said he.

She sat down by him.

" Oh, my dear, I was so sorry about your spoiled morning," she said. " But you behaved like a brick. I just came to say that."

Rex felt that it was his mother's fault, her amiable but disastrous fault, that this parody of pleasure had been his. His general impatience with circumstances included her.

" I don't think much of the new plan," he observed. " What are the results up to date ? I don't consider them very successful. He's all right, of course : he hasn't the smallest idea how I hated it all. He only

knew he liked it. If I did something he didn't like, he'd be down on me again."

"Oh, Rex, I wish you didn't feel like that," she said. "Your father's so pleased with you. He said you were the most delightful companion."

"I know I was. I've done exactly what he wanted since he called me in the middle of the night. I read those blasted books till breakfast, I spent a perfectly beastly morning instead of a jolly one, and missed a bathe and a bask."

"I know. It was dear of you," she said.

Her face was full of puzzled love, and that somehow irritated him. He had done all this to make her happy, and instead she was worried and pucker-browed.

"It wasn't dear of me," he asserted. "I hated it all the time. Thank goodness the tide won't serve for another expedition of the sort to-morrow."

"I'm rather sick at heart," she said.

"But you've got no business to be. Father's pleased and I've done what you wished me."

"It's no use if you feel like that," she said.

Suddenly the knowledge that she would do anything in the world at whatever personal loss or inconvenience to make him and his father fond of each other, presented itself vividly to him. If it had been she who was concerned, with what eager delight would she have done whatever his father had a whim for, in order that he should be pleased. She would have done the same for him too, messed up or abandoned any scheme of pleasure for herself, and joyed in the sacrifice of it.

He took up her hand in a quick impulse of affection. "Oh, I've been such an ass," he said. "I've had just one rather dull morning because you wanted me to please

father, and now by being cross and disagreeable I've spoiled all your pleasure, which was not the intention. It's rotten of me : you mustn't mind what I say."

She responded to that, swift and eager.

"You're a dear boy," she said. "And I've been heavy about it. It was heavy to tell you I was sick at heart."

"It was, it was!" said Rex. "Don't let it occur again."

He laughed.

"Father and I are like Abraham and Isaac," he said. "I'm being sacrificed, you see, and you've got to be the angel calling to him. Don't let us be heavy. That Ibsen affair at breakfast now! That was funny. Fancy father ordering me a new copy. I've got two now, and the family is fifteen shillings the poorer, just because father wanted to be melodramatic over the original one. Shun melodrama, or you'll end in the workhouse. . . Thank the Lord, there's a humorous side to everything."

She could not do better than leave it at that.

"You won't see the humorous side of me if I interrupt you any longer," she said.

Rex glanced at the notes and scribblings he had brought out with him. His irritation, sharp and distracting as toothache, had ceased to stab him, and he began to want to get to work.

"I shan't," he said. "Go completely away at once, mother darling, or you'll spoil my afternoon, and I shall tell father what a nuisance you are."

Her hand lingered on his neck a moment, and he was quite conscious that he wished she would take it away, and leave him.

REX'S industry during the ensuing week was of the most exemplary character. He drank the tea of bitterness every morning about half-past six, and remained smokeless till breakfast. These were extremely tedious experiences and the sacred cause of filial piety demanded also that he should spend a couple of afternoons shooting over muddy and depopulated stubbles, and make a bicycling expedition to Clauston, where an undecipherable fresco, probably Elizabethan, had been discovered in the church. It was all very boring, and with clear-eyed cynicism Rex was fully aware that the prescription, so ardently recommended by his mother, and so unfalteringly taken by him, was quite inefficacious. The ill-tasting stuff only caused Rex a wry mouth : it was not sweet to the belly, nor did he find himself growing in ease towards his father. And though Mr. Goodwin applauded Rex's quick conjectures as to the meaning of the dreary fresco, and found his wishes treated with obedience, he did not like Rex the more for these concessions. He was pleased at his unusual industry, but there was nothing fundamental gained. Their mutual antipathy was like some smouldering volcano, to which heretofore the bickerings and domestic frictions had been in the nature of a safety-valve. Black smoke, projected stones, and little snakes of escaping lava had relieved the pressure. Now the crater had been choked with the rubble of increased respect and obedience, and below the antipathy was not quenched ; it only gathered force. But the existence or even the possibility of so dangerous a process was suspected by none of them, least of all by Mrs. Goodwin. She saw with a glow of delight Rex's impeccable be-

haviour to his father, and her husband's approbation of his changed demeanour. Out of such promising manifestations nothing, surely, but good could be augured. They would get to appreciate each other better, the son she so passionately loved, and the husband to whose happiness she so unswervingly sacrificed herself.

Rex's immediate object had been gained : Oliver had come, and he took for granted that his labours at the law should cease for the period of his stay. After breakfast on the first morning, they had gone swinging off together for a day on the beach with laden satchels and a cargo of talk to be discharged. Their friendship was of a strangely unequal sort ; Oliver, in regard to it, had no existence of his own, it was his contribution to merge himself in his friend, and he demanded nothing of Rex except the mere acceptance of himself.

" Good Lord, it was ripping to awake this morning, and know I was here," said Oliver. " A whole week, too : will your people be able to bear it ? Are they brave ? "

" They've got to be," said Rex. " I've paid for it in advance. At half-past six o'clock for the last week have I got up and swotted at law till breakfast. Not to mention frescoes and miles of empty stubbles. We had a first-class row some days ago, and he said you shouldn't come unless I behaved myself."

" Oh, how ripping ! That shows you wanted me."

" Of course I did, that was why I was such a lamb."

" Oh, ' lamb ' was it ? " said Oliver. " Did you ever see a black panther in a sheep-skin ? "

" But I was a lamb," said Rex. " And then it pleased my mother. The idea was that if I did everything my father wanted, I should become no end of a pal with

him. I should cease to get irritated with him, if I didn't show it. On the same principle you would cease to have a cold if you didn't blow your nose. But she's a dear."

"She adores you," said Oliver. "That's why she's rather taken to me. Your father dislikes me, for the corresponding reason."

"Why do you think that?" demanded Rex.

"Oh, that sort of thing is so easy to see. He is frightfully polite to me, and I can see that it's just because he wants not to be. Before long he'll be rather rude. But I like being disliked."

Rex laughed.

"You ought to be me then," he said. "The old man can't bear me, though it doesn't manifest itself in politeness. About that row. If he had said you shouldn't come here, I had a neat plan. I should have asked you to come down to the village inn. Then I should have packed a bag and joined you."

Oliver took Rex's satchel which he was shifting from hand to hand.

"I'll carry it," he said. "Oh, Rex, that would have been jolly, though of course it's awfully nice at your house. But there'd have been no one to bother us. I think when your people can't stand me any more I shall go there. Promise to come."

"Can't, while this harmony lasts at home."

"Break it up then: play some light and airy discords. Oh, look here, about London. You're coming up in October, aren't you? Do come and stay with us till you find diggings that suit you. You never will: all diggings stink. My people are a bit slow, but frightfully amiable. Just my mother and sister, you know."

Rex saw where this tended. Oliver's notion was clearly that he should live with him and his family. The scheme promised comfort and economy, but instantly some instinct negatived the idea. It wasn't the perpetual presence of a 'frightfully amiable' mother and sister that he shied at; somehow, it was Oliver's perpetual presence and devotion that would be intolerable. There was no one in the world whom he was fonder of, but somehow . . .

"That's awfully good of you," he said. "I'll come with pleasure while I'm looking out for diggings."

They had come to the edge of the estuary. To-day it was empty from bank to bank; far away at the mouth of it the tide was beginning to creep up, but here sand-shoals and glistening mud-banks were quite bare of water. The last tide had left a contour of jettisoned sea-wash across the tracts of shingle and amphibious vegetation that bordered it; sticks and fragments of sea-weed, white cuttle-fish bones and innumerable bleached shells of small crabs traced a white line across the grey grasses and tufts of sea-pink. A light wind spiced with sea blew from the further shore, laden with the sharp aroma of mud and drying sea-weed. All over the expanse were companies of gulls and smaller waders. Redshanks piped an alarm-note at their approach, and a flock of dunlin rose in the air, invisible against the brightness, and then, as they wheeled, bursting into a shower of white stars. Ringed plovers fluted, and the greater gulls barked, and in the manner of aeroplanes ran along the mud getting impetus for their rising. The sense of home was thick in the air for Rex; to be with Oliver, as far as that went, was as good as being by himself; the sea-lavender and the wild shy birds,

the enormous sky and the great flat emptinesses reasserted themselves again. Oliver, with his hospitable proposal almost coalesced with himself and them. Rex stopped on the edge of the mud, and began taking off shoes and stockings, balancing himself first on one foot and then the other, like a stork.

"Have we got to wade across this mud?" asked Oliver. "Shan't we get muddy?"

"Of course we shall. That's part of the game."

"But what happens to us when the tide comes up?"

"Why, of course we fool about on the other side till it goes down again. Cut off, marooned. Oh, be quick, Oliver. I want to get across. There's miles of sand and shingle and sea, and nobody there!"

"Ripping," said Oliver.

Rex, hardened by the barefooted habit, went scathless over beds of pebbles and general pricklinesses, the other boy trod warily with squeals.

"But it hurts," he said. "Why the devil doesn't it hurt you? Your feet must be horny. I think you are horny altogether. You're walking over spines and sharp rocks without feeling; it is like you."

"A word more of personal abuse," shouted Rex, "and I'll pick you up and carry you."

"I wish you would. No, I don't mean that. Don't rag, Rex. Thank God, there's sand at last."

Oliver paused on a sandbank.

"And there's the tide coming up," he said. "The cruel crawling foam, as Mr. Kingsley said, and locks of my hair will be found among the nets, and I shall be heard on windy nights calling the crabs home. There's something in the air that has got into my head and makes me talk this rot."

Oliver slipped on a strand of greasy sea-weed, and fell flat on his back.

"That," he said, "was put there on purpose by an all-wise Providence, in order to make me fall down. There are no such things as accidents, all is part of an inscrutable plan. Another part of that plan is that you should have a horny nature. You mean to come and stay with me just for a few days, till you find some mouldy pigsty, and then you'll go off by yourself. Why won't you come just indefinitely?"

"Because I'm morose," said Rex. "I've got some awful vein of secrecy and independence about me. I like being alone when I choose."

"You shall. You aren't so marvellously attractive that none of us will be able to keep away from you. I shall be working for the Foreign Office, and we shall have a sitting-room to ourselves. Or a flat. How about it if I took a flat? I've often thought of it."

Rex brushed the wet sand off Oliver's back.

"I feel a brute," he said. "But it would be an awful pity if we got bored with each other."

Oliver gave him a quick glance.

"What you mean is, if you got bored with me," he said.

Rex considered this.

"I suppose I do," he said. "I'm a self-centred animal, as you know pretty well by now. We all are really. People talk a fearful lot of rubbish about being unselfish. They're not unselfish really, it makes them happier to think about other people, just as some men think about postage stamps, and pictures and muck. They're made that way. They like being agreeable to other people. I don't: I believe really that I like being disagreeable."

"I believe you do. But you're not consistent. You make yourself quite odious for days together, and then you suddenly become enchanting. You put a thorn-fence round yourself and mock at everybody from inside. And then quite suddenly you sweep it all away, and—and there you are."

"That's quite enough about me," said Rex. "By Jove, what a day we're going to have! Look, there's the tide pouring up behind us. It will be six hours before we can cross again."

They pushed through the suæda-bushes, and took a narrow path that wound through the sea-lavender towards the high shingle bank of the beach. Presently they crossed this, and there in front were the long reaches of sand, and the sea just a-ripple under the breeze.

"The North Sea or German Ocean," said Rex, as if introducing a friend. "Let's get inside at once."

Hot with their walk they stripped, dashed across the sands and shallow water at the edge, and flinging themselves into the liquid coolness, foamed out from the land, Rex broad and brown-shouldered from his basking days, Oliver slender and white but no less vigorous. Plough and burrow as he might with his strong over-hand stroke, Rex could not shake off the limbs that contracted and shot out again beside him, and presently, panting and spent, they turned over and floated in the current that swept along the coast. Soon their heaped clothes were no more than a white speck on the beach, and they came in, and walked back along the shore, shining and dripping.

"That washes all the devils out of a fellow," said Rex, "and now we'll bask, and put them all carefully back again."

Oliver squeezed the water out of his yellow hair.

"Rex, you're a Red Indian," he said. "Why aren't I brown?"

"Dunno. Under-exposed, I expect. O Lord, what a good thing they thought of the sea when they made the world. Imagine if it had been left out. I haven't got a yard of thorn-fence left. Is it you or the sea that's gone and done that?"

"Me, without the smallest doubt. What else can I do for you?"

"Lie down and listen to all I've got to tell you about my play. All this week I've absolutely longed for you to be here in order to jaw about it to you. Will it bore you frightfully?"

"I shall go to sleep if it does. Rather ripping to go to sleep in the sun, and wake up and wonder where one is and who's there. But it may be interesting, in which case I shall remain awake. Can't promise."

Rex drew a sheaf of papers from his satchel. There was the general scheme of the play and, by now, most of the first act written, and fragments of other scenes. He lay propped on his elbows with his manuscript in his hands; Oliver, with his back on the warm sand, threw his arm across his eyes to shield them from the glare, and the sun shone through the teeth of his half-opened mouth. Rex just gave a sketch of his characters, and then paused.

"I think I won't read you the outline of the play first," he said. "I'll read the act I've written. After that, you shall tell me what happens."

"Right. If I tell you wrong, you mustn't be sick with me."

"With myself more likely. Now!"

Rex soon got completely absorbed in his recital. Ten minutes ago when he came out of the sea, Oliver had usurped his whole mind; his thorn-fence, as he said, had got washed off with all his devils clinging to it, and his heart stood open to his friend. But now he was withdrawn again into himself and his brain and his ambitions, and Oliver was no more than some critical stranger who lay beside him. Oliver, on the other hand, though he gave his attention and acuteness to listening, was absorbed not so much in Rex's play, as in Rex himself. But this recital was Rex too, the cynical, observant fellow, who dissected motives so ruthlessly, and looked on the world with a smile that mocked, and shoulders that shrugged, and built his thorn-fence of impregnable prickliness. All these characteristics came out in his work: he made parodies of decent folk, and set them up for derision. There was certainly Rex's mother among them disguised, it is true, as a middle-aged man, but quite unmistakable, wise and affectionate, but somehow futile and caricatured in her passage through the refracting crystal of Rex's mind. Rex was there himself, though his relationship to her was erased, and he had no less keen a derision for this parody of himself. Finally, so Oliver felt sure, there was himself, boy no longer, but a young married woman, sentimental and devoted but merely boring those who were the objects of her affection. To Oliver's subtle mind all this was transparently clear, but he had no shadow of resentment at Rex's delineation. There was a genial savagery about it all: he was being the black panther and snarling behind the bars of his own nature. Probably he didn't know what he had done. . . .

The act came to an end, and Rex turned over towards him on his side.

"Good Lord, what dreary people they all are," he observed. "I didn't realize that till I came to read it aloud. Been to sleep? I congratulate you, if you have."

"No, I've been very much awake," said he. "You kept on prodding me."

"Prodding you?" asked Rex. He spoke, Oliver thought, as a man, very heavy with sleep, might speak, who was told something of which he did not wholly grasp the significance.

"Yes, but we'll talk about that presently. Now I'm going to tell you what I think happens, or what I think ought to happen."

He sat up and drew himself a little away from Rex. There was something in this strong brown proximity of him, lying there in the candour of the sun and sea, which would make him look on Rex's work with Rex's eyes, and infect him with Rex's personality. He did not want that, he wanted to look at it with critical impartiality. . . . But was that really Rex's view of him?

He stated his view about the course the play should run, and at the end Rex gave a great shout of exultation.

"That's it," he said. "Oliver, you're a brick. You've solved what I've been puzzling about, namely what that poor silly woman would do. Of course she would do just that. I knew you'd know."

Oliver turned and faced him.

"Naturally I should know," he said.

"Why?"

"Because that's what I should do myself. Now about your people. What ordinary people they are. That's a compliment, by the way. The three who matter are just your mother and I and you. You've made a man of one, and a woman of another and a fiend of the third. You don't let yourself off, anyhow."

Rex blinked at him a moment. He understood better now about the prodding.

"You mean that Sybil is like you and Charlie is like my mother?" he said.

"No, I don't mean that they're like," said Oliver, "I mean that they are your mother and me. They're not a bit like: they're gross caricatures. But that's who they are. I don't mind: don't think I mind. What I should mind would be that you thought that silly wench was like me. And Rex, what I really should mind much more would be if I thought that fiendish Francis was like you—why, he's got your father's name, by the way. It certainly is you, but it isn't like you. It's just a parody of all your bad points. You make a monster of yourself, a ludicrous realistic monster."

Oliver gave rein to his affection. He did not care how boring and sentimental he was being, or how like he was to Rex's parody of him.

"You aren't like that, and we aren't like that," he said. "But you've got in the habit of seeing the worst in people, and rather gloating over it. Of course one has to laugh at people, because they're so dam' silly, and their failings are funny. But you don't laugh at them with a smile, but with a sneer. You hate their failings, and it's such a mistake. I can't bear you to be like that, because I'm so awfully fond of you. It's

only a habit: it isn't you. But if you don't break the habit, it will become you, and you will be really like that brute you've been reading about."

He picked off a piece of sticky sea-weed that had dried on to his leg like plaster.

"It's like that," he said. "You can peel it off if you wish. It's your thorn-fence. It amuses you to note all our littlenesses and tiresomenesses. You don't find our good points—we've all got them—so diverting. You're inclined to pick people to bits instead of mending them."

Rex pondered.

"Aren't you rather picking me to bits?" he asked.

"No, no, just the opposite. I'm trying to mend you."

Rex's voice had an extraordinary amenity.

"I said you were a brick, and you are," he remarked. "It's all perfectly true what you've said. And why you don't spit on me, I don't know. But I do believe I wrote all that only half consciously. I found it there in my mind."

"Not a bit. If you found it there in your mind, as you say, it would be part of you. But it isn't."

"I've half a mind to tear the whole thing up," said Rex.

"Do nothing of the kind. Finish it with all the malice you can put into your pen. But detach it from yourself. Don't imagine that it's you. It's a cynical, observant little devil, whom you must kick out. Good Lord, what fun if you got some manager to put it on. You and your mother and I would have a box, and see what silly asses you thought us!"

Rex stood up and brushed the sand off his body.

"What a brute I am!" he observed.

"Aren't you? And I've been behaving like a parson. Let's forget all about it. I think you said 'The North Sea or German Ocean.' After which I say lunch."

It was characteristic of the quality of their friendship that all this gave rise to no need for circumspection or careful treading when they returned to the subject of the play. Oliver, like all who vehemently give, had not the smallest taste for introspection. It simply did not interest him to analyse his personal feelings about Rex's caricatures: he had said what, broadly, he thought, and left it at that. And Oliver's feelings, whatever they might be, seemed to concern Rex just as little. He had said he did not 'mind,' and Rex accepted that quite literally. . . . No susceptibilities were hurt; there was no hatchet to bury, they discussed the future course of the play in all its bearings, and bathed and basked again, and trailed homewards at sunset, when the tide had again left the basin of the estuary, and the waders and gulls were populous on the succulence of the mud-flats.

The harmony which Oliver had suggested should be broken up, appeared that night to be capable of doing so for itself. Mr. Goodwin had been critical at dinner of the potatoes and the conversation and Rex's third glass of whisky and soda, and when, afterwards, he suggested to his wife that they should have a game of chess, it was no more than natural that Rex took Oliver off to his room. Talk distracted his father when he was at the chess-board, and the only other alternative was to sit and yawn. There was a shout of laughter from the hall after the door had closed behind them.

"Some joke that we are not worthy to hear," remarked Mr. Goodwin as he advanced his queen's pawn.

It would never do to remind him that he had not been very cordial about boyish humour at the dinner-table: Rex's attempts had been given a very acid reception. She played half a dozen moves in silence, wondering what sort of rejoinder would be wisest.

"They're having such a good time," she said at length. "I never saw Rex so radiant. That's a nice boy, too, Oliver Barnard."

Mr. Goodwin found her manœuvres very annoying. He could not acquiesce in the fact that she played chess so much better than he.

"That bishop of yours is luckily placed," he said. "I'm not sure that I agree with you about that young fellow. He toadies Rex."

"No, my dear: he's only very fond of him," said she.

"I can't say much for his manners either. I should have thought that as your guest and mine, after being away all day, he might have tolerated our companionship for a few minutes. But it's Rex's fault. He proposed taking him away: I shall speak to him about it."

She looked up troubled and anxious.

"Francis, I hope you'll do nothing of the kind," she said. "Rex has been behaving so well, and he's enjoying himself so much. You couldn't expect them to sit here and watch us play."

He frowned.

"Well, perhaps you'll move," he said. "You're in check."

He had overlooked a nasty answer to his check, and after an ignoble flight from knights and bishops he lost

his queen. She purposely made a stupid move, of which he failed to take advantage, and after a long dreary struggle he was beaten, and swept the pieces back into their box.

"Too late for another," he said. "We were a long time over dinner. Ha! Singing!"

He opened the door, and a piercing falsetto, ending on a very high note, and followed by a peal of laughter, was more than audible.

"Mere rowdyism," he said. "I'm not going to stand that sort of thing."

She got up.

"Oh, Francis, it will be a great pity if you interfere," she said. "They're not doing any harm. You'll only annoy Rex."

"Rex annoying me apparently doesn't matter," he said.

"He's not annoying you, dear. You're annoying yourself."

"You too, I suppose," said he.

That sunny humorous twist of her mouth, so unlike Rex's satyr smile, unwreathed itself on her face.

"Yes, my dear," she said, "I shan't like your breaking up their sing-song. I would much sooner go and sing too, if they only wanted me. Besides, it seems to me over. . . . Good night, Francis. You're not going to sit up?"

"It depends," he said.

She went upstairs with the burden of her heart's entanglements on her. Francis would not accept the fact of age, of being of the last generation. It was so much worse than useless to be impatient with the young. It was quite impossible to be young indefinitely, and when that magic left you, there was only one thing that could

make good the irreparable loss, and that was to make yourself a sympathetic wallflower. You could always retain that aroma ; though you could no longer grow, and put out fresh budding tendrils, you could keep just a blossom or two sheltered from the frosts of time, as a badge that the young would recognize. Otherwise you become a gaunt sapless stem, full of prickles and stabbing thorns, and those lovely growing creatures who might be willing to throw their fresh shoots over you, smothering you perhaps, but anyhow clinging to you, would find no comfortable harbourage, and would riot in bud and blossom elsewhere. That was the only way of taking age, just to remain young, and at the same time to be quite aware that you were old. Not to bother them, not to proffer either companionship or criticism, but just take, ever so thankfully, whatever they might give you. It would be a terrible thing, if as you grew older, you cut youth off from you, frightened it, bored it, banished it. . . .

She felt unutterably feeble and inadequate, lacking in wisdom, lacking in tact. It was sheer nonsense to suppose that love alone was a sufficient weapon with which to tackle the hourly difficulties and decisions which love itself presented. She wanted more wisdom, more discernment, the gifts of the Spirit, which were far more part of love than any helpless aching of the heart. . . .

Her husband had gone to his study. There was a pamphlet he wanted to read before retiring, but it was just as strongly his intention, irrespective of this interesting subject, to sit up till the boys went to bed. He would give them till twelve o'clock, and then surely it was his duty to suggest that they had sat up long

enough. Margaret was altogether too weak: in her amiable desire for every one's comfort and happiness, she neglected character. If she had had her way, she would have indulged Rex, from childhood upwards, in the gratification of every whim. She had no sense of discipline, of the formation of grave, steady, industrious habits. He did not want, so he told himself, to curtail the boy's reasonable pleasures, but after a day's complete idleness, to talk and laugh and sing rowdy songs half the night was an excessive indulgence. He mistrusted Oliver's companionship for Rex: it was clear that he thought Rex a wonderful fellow: his devotion was of just the kind to minister to Rex's self-assertiveness. Certainly Rex had behaved well enough this last week, but he must not think that that had brought him unlimited license. He needed management and control, which his mother had no notion of. Yet, for all her slackness, he was aware that she managed him far better than he did himself. That was bitter to him; it stirred some ferment of jealousy in him, which makes rancid that which might have been love, except for this acid. He knew he was jealous of both of them in their relation to each other: with neither of them had he established that relation. . . .

His pamphlet lay unread, and the minutes ticked by till the twelve strokes of midnight sounded from the clock on the mantelpiece. From the room opposite there was still the sound of laughter and loud talk, and he crossed the passage and entered.

Rex was seated in the only comfortable chair the room contained, Oliver was on the floor making a chair-back of Rex's knees. He had a match-box in his hand and was lighting matches one after the other, apparently for

the pleasure of seeing them flare up, then blowing them out and throwing them into the grate. Small though the room was the atmosphere was so thick with cigarette smoke, that the opposite wall was seen dimly as through a fog, and as he opened the door wreaths of vapour drifted out into the hall. On the table at Rex's elbow was a decanter of whisky and an empty syphon. There they had been all evening, so Mr. Goodwin told himself, drinking and smoking and making a row. He managed to bridle his annoyance, but he could put no kind of cordiality into his voice.

"Surely it's bedtime, Rex," he said. "Open the window, please. The house will reek of your cigarettes to-morrow."

Oliver jumped up.

"I say we've been sitting with the window shut all the time," he said. "I thought it was getting a bit thick. Have you come in for a drink, Mr. Goodwin?"

"No, I have not," said he. "I ventured to come in, in order to suggest that you should go to bed. Rex mustn't keep you up any longer."

Oliver laughed.

"I think we were keeping each other up," he said. "We got talking."

"I was under the impression that you got singing," said Mr. Goodwin. His tone did not supply the lightness which the words lacked.

Rex felt his temper rising.

"Come up to bed, Oliver," he said, giving his back to his father. "You can finish what you were saying upstairs. I'll look in on you."

He turned round again.

"Do you wish me to leave the window open, father,

and go to bed," he said, "or shall I wait till the room is aired and then shut it?"

Mr. Goodwin meant to speak to Rex now at once about the manner of his evening and get it over, but he had the sense to see that Rex would justly resent his doing this before his friend.

"We mustn't keep Mr. Barnard up," he said. "I'll wait with you till the room is aired. Good night, Mr. Barnard; I hope you'll sleep well."

Oliver could not stay after this.

"Good night, sir," he said. "Same to you. See you again, Rex."

Mr. Goodwin remembered his wife's counsel, and determined to exercise the utmost self-control. He would not let his anger flare, but Rex must understand that he did not intend to countenance these pot-house proceedings. The room reeked of whisky and smoke. Rex stumbled as he came back from the window: instantly his father wondered if he was quite sober. From him he glanced to the half-empty decanter, and the grate speckled thick with cigarette ends. He tried to put friendliness into his voice: at the same time he watched Rex closely.

"Rex," he said. "I must tell you at once that I don't like the way you and your friend have spent your evening. You came in here directly after dinner and have been drinking and smoking and making a row from then till after midnight. There must be fifty cigarette ends in the fireplace, and the room was as thick as a fog. My clothes will have to be hung up out of doors to get the smell out of them, and as for yours—— There's moderation in all things."

"They were entirely Oliver's cigarettes," said Rex.

"That is not what I mean, and you know it," said his father sharply. "That decanter of whisky too. I noticed that it was full before dinner. You've drunk more than half the bottle."

Rex suddenly caught the implication of his father's scrutiny of him.

"Oh, if you suppose I'm tipsy, you're quite off the track," he said. "I think you noticed my stumbling just now, didn't you? That was because I caught my foot in one of the holes in the carpet. There're a good many of them."

"Have I accused you of being tipsy?" asked Mr. Goodwin.

"That was what you were thinking. What else did your allusion to the whisky mean? And you looked to see if I was steady on my feet. I am merely answering the question you were putting to yourself. I am dishevelled because we've been ragging. I have extremely watery eyes, because they are full of tobacco smoke. As for the singing, you've already expressed yourself about that to Oliver!"

Rex's devil was awake. It prompted him to be ingeniously provoking. All this last week he had tried to please his father, and there was no result in the way of a responsive forbearance, no abatement of any readiness to suspect him of delinquencies. He knew himself to be completely sober; he knew equally well that his father had questioned that.

Mr. Goodwin flared up at these remarks.

"Rex, it is not long ago that I told you I required respect from you," he said.

"I am aware of that. But let us settle this first, please. What right had you got to suppose I was drunk?"

The gulf between them yawned enormous, and the pity of it, with pity for himself, struck the elder man as with a blow. He had never much sought for friendship in this world, but it was terrible that the man who liked him least should be his only son. He had been at fault, too, to-night; his wife had warned him of the danger of interference, and all his resolves to be moderate had only ended in this. Yet he had been right (he clung to that) to protest against this pot-house proceeding, right, but how unwise! But above all, he had been utterly wrong in letting himself suspect, as he certainly had done, that Rex had drunk too much. His heart was beating violently with anger, and it was Rex who had the best right to be angry.

There was only one thing to be done.

"I ask your pardon, Rex," he said. "I did wonder if you were sober, and I had no right to do that. You mustn't remember that against me, because I entirely withdraw it."

For a moment Rex paused, scarcely believing his ears. Then with an affectionate gesture, ever so rare with him, he laid his hand on his father's shoulder.

"That's all right, Dad!" he said, unconsciously using the obsolete word. "Never think of it again."

They went upstairs together. Opposite Oliver's door Rex stopped.

"I'm just going in for a minute," he said. "Good night, father."

Oliver was already half-undressed, examining and anointing with something that smelt of violets his shoulders which the sun had scorched to a red and vivid tenderness.

"My complexion's quite ruined," he said in a high

falsetto. "Nobody will want to marry me, and I shall never be able to wear a low dress again. So tiresome! Well, Rex, is it peace, O Ahaziah? I say, your father did not like my singing. And it's generally so much admired. 'Oh, have you brought your music, dear Mr. Oliver,' that's what all the ladies say to me. 'Then you'll sing to us after dinner! That will be a pleasure!'"

"Fool," said Rex, sitting down on his bed.

"Oh, what a word to use!" said Oliver. Then he noticed the sullen face of the other. That was Rex's way: when he was serious, he always looked angry: when he was angry he always looked pleasant.

"What's the matter, Rex?" he asked. "Has your father been stuffy? What does it matter, anyhow? Just don't pay any attention. They get like that, when they're old."

"No, that's not it," said Rex. "He was stuffy enough, and then I was stuffy too, and he apologized. But it's all so perfectly hopeless. He made an ass of himself, and owned up absolutely frankly, and I felt a brute, and we made it up. But it'll happen again, there's nothing changed really. He's not changed, nor am I: we're just our damned old selves."

"But what was it all about? Not because I sang and lit matches?"

"No: he thought I was drunk, and I knew he was thinking it, and told him so. I could have killed him. And then he said he was wrong, and I could almost have kissed him."

Oliver had become quite serious again. Whatever had happened, must, to his mind, be of infinite unimportance compared to Rex's comfort.

"Well then, brighten up," he said. "The night's

young yet. Let's go on where we left off. Of course I can't understand what you feel like, so where's the use of my trying? My father died when I was six. I only just remember him. He had a red beard. That's all I know of him."

"Lucky dog," said Rex, "though I don't suppose I mean that. But why do old people interfere? They don't understand us. They've forgotten what it's like to be young."

Oliver was passing a silk thread between his teeth and spitting.

"On the other hand, we don't know what it's like to be old," he said.

"We can make a pretty good guess," said Rex.

The reconciliation, as Rex had foreseen, proved like so many previous peacemakings, to have nothing fundamentally healing about it. More than ever it resembled some stiff unporous bandage tied round an angry wound: the trouble and source of mischief was not removed, it was only rendered the more dangerous by reason of its being bound up. Rex, sleepy and exasperated, got up at six again next morning, and voluntarily spent a quite intolerable couple of hours over his books in his father's study, in order to show himself anxious to cement the truce, but the essential effect on him was to confirm his knowledge of the uselessness of these sacrifices. Mr. Goodwin, again, refrained from throwing open all doors and windows to purge the house of the stale odours that had come in from the befogged sitting-room last night, until Rex and his friend had set off for another day on the Point, for fear of resuscitating in Rex those acid memories, and instead he inwardly fumed and

fretted over the faintest of aromas, foreseeing that the drawing-room and hall would never be free of the 'pot-house' atmosphere, which, so emotionally evident to him, was frankly imperceptible to his wife. . . . He had told her nothing about the collision, partly it would be tantamount to confessing that she had been right and he wrong, partly he already doubted whether his apology had been consistent with his true duty to Rex. He had certainly been sober, but just as certainly he had drunk far more than a reasonable allowance of whisky. Mr. Goodwin felt he ought to have called his attention to that, telling him, of course with all moderation, that the habit of taking more than was good for one, was quite consistent with sobriety. He was aware now that it would be unwise to open the subject again with this prepared homily, but he began, out of mere habit, to watch for occasions which warranted his strictures.

It wounded him to see how much at their ease the two boys were with his wife. Often he heard from his study the sounds of laughter and loud cheerful talk in the drawing-room next door, before they started for their day on the beach, or when they returned late for tea, and had fresh supplies brought them. Her voice and her laughter were in evidence there, but even while he wanted, with some secret ache, to take part in their merriment, he found himself blaming her for spoiling them: if they did not choose to come back in time for tea, they ought to put up with the natural results of their unpunctuality. Once or twice he joined them, but on his entry the laughter died: Rex pulled his tie straight and Oliver smoothed his hair. His wife tried to keep the merriment alive: she told him how Oliver had lain down upon a patch of oil-refuse, covering his shoulders

with it, and how Rex had tried to comb it off him with edged pieces of shingle, with the effect that he looked like a section of a chess-board. . . . Or Rex had shown some piece of profound knowledge and Oliver had called him a Rexicon. . . . But what had been amusing before, had lost its spice with his entry, and Rex made speed to finish his tea, for there was just time for half-a-dozen holes at golf. Once he joined them in a three-ball match, and the two boys who made rude comments on each other's play, if a half-topped approach skimmed over a bunker and finished near the hole, said "Good shot" if he did something of the same nature. But though he wanted comradeship, he knew that he would not have been pleased if Oliver, instead of complimenting him, had said "Blasted fluke!" as he did to Rex. Though he coveted easy relations with them, he was on the look-out for any lapse in the respect that was due to him.

Chapter IV

IT was a clear evening towards the end of October. Rex had been detained rather later than usual at the office, and it was after sunset when he boarded his bus in the Strand, which would take him within a few hundred yards of the house in Pont Street, where he still made his home with Oliver's family. The rain which had fallen steadily all afternoon had cleared off, and light rose-flushed clouds hung in the dusky sky. Pavements and streets were wet, and gleamed with the reflection of the lamps and the fronts of illuminated shops. Usually, for the sake of air and movement after the sedentary day, he walked home, to-day he was eager to get back as soon as possible, for he wanted to have

as long a spell as he could at the work which mattered to him so much more than the dreary routine of the office. Also, a week ago, he had finished and despatched to a theatrical manager the play at which he had been at work these last two months, and any post might bring him tidings of it. But the moment he had got that off his hands, he had begun to sketch the outline of another, and this evening he would attack the actual writing of it. The whole of his intellectual activity centred on drama : all that he read, all that he worked at in the office, all that he saw and experienced during the day, he critically tasted to see if he could not find in it some dramatic flavour. People interested him chiefly for that reason : he dissected and analysed the presentation they made of themselves, he observed their littlenesses, their airs and pretences, their equivocations and subterfuges, not because he had a fellow-feeling with them, and saw their faults with genial sympathy, but because from such traits and characteristics comedy was made. The small failings of folk constituted their amusing side. He imagined them in the situations which he had framed, put them in relations of love or enmity or scheming for and against each other. He took an idea, and phrased the communication of it dramatically or turned it into dialogue. . . . He imagined Oliver getting engaged to some wholly impossible young woman, and tried to embody in words the scene between him and his mother. He imagined Mrs. Barnard finding out something discreditable about himself, and tried to hear her give her reasons why she could not have the pleasure of housing him any longer. He was indefatigable in such explorations.

Rex had enjoyed himself immensely during this last

month ; the office was a weary business, but its tedium was of the mechanical sort, and he could attend sufficiently to his work with some outlying tract of his brain, and churn the more important topics round in his head all the while. Then, when that was over, he came back to the house where all was made so comfortable and convenient. There was a big sitting-room close to the front door which was sanctuary for himself and Oliver, and there, except for his friend's presence, he could work undisturbed. Often they dined early and went to the theatre and that served his purpose too, for he could study what was effective in actual presentation, and observe the ' stunts ' of the eminent lights of the English stage. They all seemed to him to have stunts: the public expected a certain sort of exhibition from each. One was emphatically a lady, and never did anything unworthy of her traditions, in spite of the shrewdest provocation. Another was merely silly and good-natured, though much wiser than her conversation would lead you to expect. All through the play she would be just a feckless butterfly, and yet all the time she was making a wonderful plan for everybody to marry the right people. They moved in their well-appointed orbits like the moon : you really would have thought that the playwright had written his drama on purpose to give the moon the opportunity to travel across the sky, with alternation of storm-cloud and serenity, and shine in full effulgence at the last. Another was noble and pensive, he could be trusted to do the right thing in the end, and forgive everybody. Another wore pyjamas whenever possible and was always wanting to have a quiet night, but there were people on the telephone who disturbed him, and people under the bed, and his aunt from whom

he had expectations always came in at inopportune moments when he was kissing somebody whom he ought never to have kissed. Rex felt that by careful study, he might, when he had more experience, be able to produce suitable conversation for even the gentleman in pyjamas. But primarily and intensely, he wanted to write a play that was worth writing. . . .

On other nights Mrs. Barnard entertained small parties at home. That was pleasant enough, and it was certainly worth while to make oneself agreeable. Rex could assume an expression of rapt attention when he was bored, and laughed in exactly the right place, and fixed his dark bright eyes, all shining with sympathy, on the faces of middle-aged women who had rueful histories to confide in him. He was charming at the bridge-table, and if his partner made a wilder muddle than usual over the play of the hand, found no end of admirable reasons for her having played precisely as she did. All this was worth while : he had to make his way in London, and he must begin by making friends with the mammon of righteousness and respectability. The sincerity of his motive more than obliterated the occasional insincerities of his manner.

He might not have troubled to be so profuse with the small change of attention and agreeableness, if he had contemplated remaining indefinitely in his present quarters. There were great and obvious advantages in so doing, free board, lodging and entertainment were things not to be despised by one whose father had so Spartan an estimate of the expenditure necessary to decent existence. Mr. Goodwin had told him quite simply when he announced the amount of his exiguous allowance, that he himself was not a rich man, and that even if he had

been he would not have given Rex any more. Rex was going to London to work and learn to support himself, not to divert himself with theatres and parties that lasted half the night. . . .

Rex's admirable memory recalled the scene in his father's study; he fashioned the very rumble of the wheels of the omnibus into the timbre of his father's voice. Word for word he reproduced to his own inward ear the edification and high purpose.

"You're in a different position, Rex," he said, "to that of your friend Barnard, and, I dare say, many more of your Cambridge contemporaries. He can throw his money about, so I gather, as he pleases, and there's no necessity for him to do a stroke of work. But you've got to earn your living. I can't support you in idleness, and indeed, I wouldn't if I could. I worked hard enough when I was a young man . . ."

He tried to drop the tutorial inflexion and to assume the parental.

"Now is the time for making habits, my dear boy," he said. "Accustom yourself to industry and frugality now, and you'll find you've disciplined yourself for life. What I'm giving you will be sufficient to pay for a couple of comfortable rooms in some quiet quarter, where they'll make your breakfast, and you'll get your dinner at your club, or some simple restaurant. You'll be able to dress yourself neatly, and always have some pocket-money. But it won't run, and I don't mean it to, to unlimited taxis and theatre-tickets. Get in a spell of walking every day, and there are tubes and omnibuses for wet weather. You're not in London to amuse yourself, but to work. You'll have good holidays, and your mother and I will always welcome you here."

The month he had just passed had not borne any very close resemblance to his father's forecast, but Rex was already feeling the want of the independence and privacy implied by the 'couple of comfortable rooms.' In spite of the domestic luxury which was his, he longed for some such *pied-à-terre* of his own, where he could immerse himself without interruption, however friendly, and that very morning he had engaged a modest lodging, bedroom and sitting-room opening into each other, in Brompton Square. It was near Pont Street, which was an advantage, for he fully intended to drop in there for dinner with considerable frequency, and he would be free from the calls entailed by domestic life. He wanted, when he chose, to be entirely sequestered, and, when he chose, to have a companion of his own selection. There was no companion whom he would have selected so frequently or enjoyed so much as Oliver, but there were occasions, many of them, when he wanted, with the sense of positive hunger, nobody at all. . . . And Oliver, by some curious perverse psychology, whom he liked so immensely more than anyone else, was for that very reason, the person who was most antagonistic to the instinct of isolation. The knowledge of his devotion invaded Rex, by the tacit claim of its existence. If you piped to Oliver he always danced; if you refrained from piping, he sat, quite unself-assertive, till you piped again. Rex wanted him to be always "on tap," but he liked to have control of the tap, and turn it completely off, if he wished.

He let himself into the house, and went to the sanctuary, hoping to have it to himself. But Oliver was there, and turned in his long chair, as he entered.

"Hullo, Rex," he said. "Parcel for you."

Rex took up the square registered package, knowing what it was before he opened it. He drew out the three thin sheaves of foolscap, that it contained, and the typewritten sheet which accompanied them, and which notified him that Mr. Roley had read his play with great interest, but did not see his way to produce it. He would be happy to consider any further play which Rex might care to send him, as he thought his work promising.

Rex slipped the contents back into their envelope again, and went straight to the table where he worked. He cut off from his mind the rejected play, cut off, too, the thought of Oliver, except mildly to wish him elsewhere. Just for the moment of lighting his cigarette and inhaling the first mouthful of its crispness, he wished that Mr. Roley had indicated, ever so cursorily, where his play failed, for that would be useful to him now. But as Mr. Roley had not felt such interest, or lacked the courtesy to express it, Rex had to go ahead to the best of his power, unguided by the precepts of the experienced. A sentence he had left unfinished this morning had been mentally completed by him in the office, and he knew the line he meant to take. In a couple of minutes he was deep in his work again.

From the corner of his eye he saw Oliver put his paper down, and obliquely caught his glance. Oliver, of course, knew that the play had been sent to Mr. Roley, and that Rex for the last two days had been expecting some word for good or ill about it. Rex had said that his friend was really more anxious about the fate of it than he. He frowned at the silent interruption and tried to concentrate on his work again. If he let himself think

about the rejected play he knew that he would feel discouraged, and he had but the faintest use for discouragement in any form. But somehow Oliver's silence became a reproach, and the mute justice of it disturbed him. He laid down his pen.

"Yes, that's my play all right," he said. "Roley doesn't see his way."

"Oh, Rex, I am sorry," said Oliver. "Silly man he must be. Why doesn't he see his way? What's the matter with it?"

Rex took the typewritten sheet out of the package.

"That's what he says," he remarked. "Chuck it away when you've read it."

The phrase he wanted flitted into his mind and flitted out again. But for this interruption he felt sure he would have pinned it down. Why on earth didn't Oliver read his paper or go away? . . .

Oliver did neither: he read Mr. Roley's note through, and threw it into the grate. After a pause he picked it up, uncrumpled it and read it again. This fidgeting got on Rex's nerves, and before long he swept his papers together and got up.

"I'll just go up to my bedroom, I think," he said, in a perfectly even, pleasant voice. He did not look at Oliver: he felt that if he did that he would break out and shout at him, "Oh for God's sake take your sympathy and your presence away! They bore me, they get between me and my work. . . ."

Oliver was quicker than he.

"No, stop here, Rex," he said. "I was just going up to see my mother. Dinner at 8.30. By the way, Mrs. Winton's coming."

"Mrs. Winton?" asked Rex. He had a notion he

had heard her name, though why Oliver should suppose it interested him . . .

"Yes. She was Mrs. Roley. Divorced him, and resumed her maiden name with Missis. So long. You'll have the room to yourself till dinner: you shan't be disturbed."

Rex looked at him with friendlier eyes: he had really hated him just now for his fidgeting silence.

"I'm an absolute hog," he said.

"Pigsty all comfortable, I hope," said Oliver.

Rex took a header into his work. He gave no further thought whatever either to Oliver or Mr. Roley or his ex-wife. The children of his brain concerned him far more than the children of men, and there they were waiting for him in that world below the surface into which he dived. He was never less alone than in hours like these when he knew he would not be disturbed.

A couple of hours passed and he began to rise to the surface again. He was exhilarated and fatigued together, and he sat back in his chair purring to himself. He read over what he had written, was satisfied that he had followed his design and development, but now a fresh consideration presented itself. He wondered whether in the new play there were the same faults and defects (or whatever they were) which made his first one unmarketable in the eyes of Mr. Roley. Absorbed though he primarily was in the business and the joy of his craft, he found himself casting that one glance at the gallery, to see how they liked it.

How he had enjoyed these last two hours and the security from interruption! How he would have enjoyed some short interval now for general recuperation, and

then the evening to himself and his work. It was a nuisance that he must go to dress and make himself agreeable through a long dinner, and the bridge which would follow. The party was sure to go on till midnight, and it would be impossible to start afresh then. But one thing he must do before he went to bed that night; he must tell Oliver with candour and affection that he meant to establish himself in a nook of his own. Friendship and comfort and economy all weighed light compared to the necessity of independence. Oliver, he thought, would understand that, or if he did not, he would accept this eremitic liberty as part of Rex. He had foreshadowed it from the first, when Oliver made his hospitable suggestion, saying that it would be 'an awful pity' if they got bored with each other, to which his friend had supplied an interpretation. He would have to disclaim that; he was not bored with Oliver in the abstract, but only practically when he wanted to work.

The party was quite a small one, eight in all, and they sat in couples on each side of a square table. Sibyl Barnard, a slightly masculine edition of Oliver, was Rex's neighbour to his left, on the other side was Mrs. Winton. She was a tall, rather frail-looking woman, with that particular pallor of complexion which, though it may suggest delicacy, is just as often the mark of superb physical health, too serene to be flushed with agitation and impervious to fatigue: Rex imagined that she could be tirelessly determined. Her hair grew low and abundantly, and was of a shining straw colour, which contrasted strongly with her very dark eyebrows. Her eyes, in the artificial light, looked nearly black, but an occasional gleam indicated that they were of the dark sapphire blue, which, like the jewel itself, requires daylight for the

perception of its hue. Her mouth was certainly too large for her other features, and now, as she talked to Oliver, making him laugh, Rex noticed that it maintained its gravity. She was not amused, it would appear, at her own wit, but then he saw that her eyes were laughing: there was an extraordinary charm about their isolated merriment. It was not a beautiful face, still less a pretty one, but there was something arresting about it. Immobile though it was, some swift alertness and intelligence gleamed in it, like the light in the depth of dark still water: you could not tell how strong was that illumination, because you did not know at what depth it shone. As he talked to Sibyl, he could see without looking at her directly that her eyes were never still; they hovered and poised and fluttered away again, and he knew that he came in for a share of their explorations. Then her voice, always rather low, diminished itself almost to a whisper, and Oliver, answering her, preserved the same discretion. It was likely that she was gleaning information of some kind.

Rex had spilt some salt, and Sibyl was almost forcibly preventing him from the time-honoured custom of a pinch over his shoulder.

"You shan't," she said. "You must resist your tendency to vain superstitions."

"I wasn't going to pour claret over it," said Rex. "But just one grain over my left shoulder with my right hand."

"No! You've thrown enough salt about already."

"But if I lost at bridge afterwards," he said, "or was run over by a motor to-morrow morning, you'd be very uncomfortable about it."

"Not so uncomfortable as you," said Sibyl.

"Well, I want to spare you such discomfort as your unsympathetic nature is capable of. Besides, you curtsy to the new moon yourself. I've seen you."

"The moon's rather different," said Sibyl. "The moon does interfere with things like tides."

Mrs. Winton wheeled to her left.

"Are you talking about superstitions?" she asked. "Do tell me any new one, Mr. Goodwin. I only just keep the most terrible disasters at bay by practising all the spells I've ever heard of, and I want a margin for safety."

Her incursion had the effect of making Sibyl execute a similar left turn. She had not anything particular to say to Rex and she didn't want to share him with anyone. Moreover, the alacrity with which he turned to the right, seemed to indicate that her share would not be a very bountiful one. Besides, her other neighbour was now conversationless, for Mrs. Barnard had wheeled too. Mrs. Barnard could never manage group-conversation. Oliver always said she had some mechanical contrivance in her neck which she wound up before dinner. She turned her head in one direction, and after precisely ten minutes the mechanism reversed it. Some day, he warned her, it would get out of order, and her head wag this way and that with ever-increasing rapidity. . . .

Mrs. Winton had nothing more to say about superstitions. Apparently that had only been the pass-word to secure her admittance.

"And breaking looking-glasses," she said, as a final farewell to the subject. "Breaking the ice, Mr. Goodwin, is more our concern this minute, for we've got to talk to each other, or spoil this—this charming circle of animated gaiety. And breaking the ice seems such a

terrifying process, for one has to jump in, and it sounds as if the water would be so horribly cold underneath. Let me see now : what does that suggest ? . . . Ah, I have it ! Do you take a cold bath in the morning or a hot one ? Or none at all ? What vast fields of agreeable pasture that opens out for us ! Now I've taken the plunge."

Rex laughed. She didn't take any more interest in the temperature of his bath than she did in superstitions. But to talk nonsense, he reflected, is a very good short cut to unstiffened intercourse. He wondered if she knew that : she looked intelligent enough to know anything.

" You've gone deep," he said. " Whether one takes a hot bath or cold or none at all is a greater symptom of character than literary tastes or religious conviction."

" It would have been wise if I had asked you if you were fond of reading," said she. " I was thinking of doing that, but it sounded so dull. But really I was opening a subject about which I already knew some of your tastes. Oliver has told me that when you are at home you spend half your day in the sea."

" Do you know my part of the country ? " he asked. " Roughton, on the Norfolk coast."

" Yes. I'm madly jealous of you already for living there. It's the most fascinating region I have ever seen. The *clou* of it is that there's nothing there. It's quite empty, just marshes and sea, earth and water, both quite flat, and an enormous sky. It must be impossible to be bored or lonely there."

She had made the modulation into the changed key so deftly that Rex really did not perceive that they had begun to talk sense.

" It is," he said. " I don't think I have ever felt lonely when I'm there alone."

She laughed.

"Ah, you're one of the fortunate ones," she said. "I thought you were: you looked it. All you've got to do, in order to ensure a thoroughly amusing day, is to shut yourself up and see nobody. I agree with you, but with the proviso that I may come out at any moment and bore other people."

"Do you often succeed?" asked he.

"Sooner or later," she said. "But of course we all do that. The worst of it is that most people don't know it. They think you can't have too much of them. Women are the worst offenders. I do dislike them. I'm sure you do too, only you're too polite to say so. I never knew a man who didn't."

"Oh, aren't we rather fond of you occasionally?" asked Rex.

"Certainly not. That's a great mistake. Most men can't get on without women, but they look on them as a necessary evil. They find them the most awful bores. All the higher instincts in men detest women as a class. That accounts for the extraordinary popularity of golf. No man really enjoys hitting a small ball for three miles in the morning, and another three in the afternoon. He only does it because it takes him away from us."

"Mixed foursomes——" began Rex.

"Mixed fiddlesticks! No man plays a mixed foursome unless he's badgered into it. That was a bad argument, Mr. Goodwin. Now do let us stop this preposterous conversation and talk about something more interesting. Let us tell each other what we do when we've got rid of all intruders and are by ourselves. Or don't we know each other well enough for that? I'll chance it anyhow. What I do is to think about the wonder-

ful achievement that I am going to bring off some day. It will make me far the most distinguished person in the world. People will pause with their mouths and eyes wide open when I walk down Sloane Street and nudge each other and whisper, 'That's she'—only they will probably say 'her.' When I go into the Park they will stand on chairs, as they used to do in the days of the professional beauties. My entrance into a theatre will completely wreck any play,—I shall particularly enjoy that—for the audience will all turn their backs on the stage, in order to see me, and the actors will forget their words, and the prompter will be looking round the corner to gaze at me, and so the curtain will have to come down."

"And what's the achievement?" asked Rex.

"I haven't the smallest idea. That's a detail, about which I must make up my mind soon. It is so important to get details right. Now it's your turn. I have broken the ice, for you can't think of anything more futile than what I've told you."

"Oh, but I can," said Rex. "I am going to do precisely the same. In fact my plan is far sillier, for I'm tremendously busy with the achievement, which you so lightly regard as a detail. My entire inability to accomplish it only makes me more certain that I am going to."

"Ah, do tell me," said she. "A book? An opera? A fortune?"

"No, a play," said he. "Many plays in fact. No more Shakespeare when I've got going."

Mrs. Barnard's eye was casting its mild beam round the table, and Rex's companion rose.

"What a pity we didn't meet years ago," she said. "I might have got my late husband to help. But I'm afraid we're no longer on speaking terms."

This rather surprising remark came quite naturally from her. She thought just that, and so she said just that. Rex took it as simply as it was uttered, but it seemed to make a milestone on the road of their half-hour's acquaintanceship: it showed a solid advance.

"I've just got a note from him," he said, "to tell me that he doesn't see his way to help."

"Have you sent him a play, do you mean, and has he refused it?"

"Just that," said Rex.

"Banish it from your memory then. Go straight on: don't pause."

"Heavens, no," said Rex.

There was still a moment. Mrs. Fortescue, the fourth of the women, had dropped an amazing amount of personal trifles under the table and Oliver was retrieving them.

"And why do you want to write plays?" she asked.

Rex had no difficulty in defining that.

"For the sake of writing plays," he said.

She moved towards the door.

"Ah, stick to that," she said, "and you'll do it."

There was still a long session before the men went upstairs, for Mr. Fortescue, Mrs. Barnard's brother who instantly settled himself on Oliver's left, in order to secure the first glass in the orbit of the port, had a great deal to say and a great deal to drink in loud appreciative sips. He had evidently read the evening paper, for he had all the news at his fingers' ends, and worked his way steadily through the columns. Political news, foreign intelligence, murders, recent novels, the state of the money markets, and race-meetings had all received

his attention and now claimed that of his victims. He had the most varied and reliable information, strictly up-to-date, on all these topics, which he produced, with his head slightly on one side, in a judicial and strictly impartial manner, giving both sides of every question, where it admitted discussion, and he then discussed it. Considering the solid and interesting nature of his subjects, it was marvellous that he could manage to be so intensely tedious. He had a legal voice, which peeled all interest and disinaction from his topics, and left them flayed.

"Mind you, I don't say that the French are wrong," he said, twirling the stem of his wine-glass; "they have got their own idea about the best way to get payments out of Germany and the seizure of a great industrial area like the Ruhr has something to be said for it. At the same time such a course has its dangers and deadlocks: experts have pointed them out to our neighbours, who have decided—or practically decided—to take the risk. But it is my most emphatic belief that such a divergence of opinion and action does not seriously endanger the solidity of the Entente. The most sensitive barometer of public feeling, the Stock Exchange, supports me in this. International financiers are not expecting serious trouble, otherwise we should have seen a considerable fall in French securities. I was talking only this afternoon to a banker, perhaps it would be indiscreet to give his name, of considerable repute and experience . . . "

The fourth of the party, Leonard Hobhouse, who was on the far side of Oliver, and thus cut off from all chance of less interesting conversation, made a signal of distress with raised eyebrows to Rex, who, similarly marooned, rose very quietly so as not to interrupt the account of Mr. Fortescue's conversation with the banker of repute

and experience, and went over to his rescue. Hobhouse was a Foreign Office Clerk, some thirty years of age, with charming manners and a complete absence of morals.

"This is all intensely interesting," he said to Rex, "but I want to know when it will stop. The Board of Trade sent a memorandum across this afternoon about the reimposition of the muzzling order. Yes. You're living here, aren't you? I wish a wealthy family would adopt me. I think I shall advertise in the 'Situations wanted' and say that a young gentleman of pleasing appearance and affectionate disposition——'"

Mr. Fortescue raised his voice a little.

"Our friend there from the Foreign Office," he said, "could no doubt tell us whether it is true."

"I know nothing whatever about it," said Hobhouse quickly, without hearing what it was.

Mr. Fortescue nodded at him approvingly.

"Ah, diplomatic reticence. Well, we must only conjecture about that. But my interlocutor this afternoon, though he explicitly said he was without inside information——"

Hobhouse turned to Rex again.

"Are you a great friend of Mrs. Winton's?" he asked.

"Never met her before," said Rex. "Tell me something about her."

"Oh, isn't it a mistake to be told about people? You may be given information which though perfectly true is utterly misleading. After all, the only important thing about people is the impression they make on you. Of course if you want mere facts like the very interesting ones we are hearing, I can give you those. She divorced her first husband for strictly Mosaic reasons, and became a planet without an orbit."

Mr. Fortescue here made a tactical error, and paused

to light a cigarette. Oliver instantly sprang to his feet.

"Most interesting, Uncle Edward," he said. "Shall we go upstairs? My mother wants to play bridge. Come on, Leonard."

Hobhouse rose.

"And she's a true Athenian," he said. "The most vivid intellectual curiosity about anything new. If you want to get on with her, keep something up your sleeve."

A rubber or two was played to the accompaniment, at one of the tables, of Mr. Fortescue's lucid and interminable analysis of the last hand. Mrs. Winton had been assigned here, while Rex was at the other table, and after the second rubber she rose.

"You throw the most intensely interesting light on it all, Mr. Fortescue," she said. "I see how much study is necessary. What a lot you have given me to think about! My brain is absolutely stuffed: I mustn't attempt to play any more to-night."

He impenetrably proceeded to reconstruct the last hand, showing how his adversaries should have made two more tricks, and she waited till the other table rose. She lingered only a few minutes more, gave smiles and handshakes and went towards the door with Oliver. Just as she was about to leave the room, she made a little sign to Rex.

"Come and see me some time," she said. "I really mean it."

The others soon followed, and presently Rex and Oliver were alone in the sanctuary for a final cigarette. Oliver, an admirable mimic, briefly and excellently reproduced his uncle at the bridge-table.

"There's really a limit to the binding power of the

family tie," he said. "Uncle Edward strains it to snapping point. By the way, you made a huge success tonight, Rex. Mrs. Winton adores you."

"Reciprocated," said Rex.

"Was it? One never can tell about you. You're perfectly priceless with crashing bores, you know. The more trying you find them, the more you appear to revel in them."

"It's only wise," said Rex. "If you permit yourself to be bored by a bore, it means the bore has scored. That's what Satan sent them out to a dinner party for. Resist the devil and all his works."

Oliver settled himself into a broad-armed chair. He no less than Rex had got a subject to broach, which it was really impossible to lead up to. You had to turn a corner and there you were. . . .

"By the way, my mother's thinking of going out to the Riviera for a couple of months," he said. "Sibyl will go along with her. Perhaps I shall go out for a few weeks to settle her in. She's taken a villa at Cannes, which she's had before. Creaks with rheumatism you know, if she stays the winter in England, poor dear. But I don't really want to go. There's no reason why I should."

Rex had been talking about the breaking of ice this evening. There was another piece of ice which somehow must be broken; he had determined to do that before he went to bed. Oliver had stamped on it, so to speak, but his heel lacked vigour.

"But why on earth don't you go?" he said. "I thought you loved the Riviera."

"Nothing amiss with London," said Oliver. "She'll leave a kitchenmaid and a housemaid and that sort of thing. You and I might have rather fun here. We would have the house to ourselves."

Rex visualized the aspects of existence when they had the house to themselves. It was apparent also that the ice, so far from being broken, was stronger than ever.

"Oh, you'd better go," he said. "Your mother will love to have you there."

That left no ambiguity about Rex's personal desires in the matter. Oliver quite understood.

"Probably I'll go," he said.

"But why not?" asked Rex. "She'll like it: you'll like it."

"Oh, we'll all like it," said Oliver quickly. "That's settled then."

Rex left his chair-arm and strolled indeterminately about the room. He picked up a match from one table, blew it out and deposited it on another, rather puzzled as to how without wanton hurt he could make himself clear. Oliver's mind stood wholly open to him; he made no mistake about that. Oliver's notion was to spend these next months here alone with him: it was Rex's notion not to.

"I shall also probably go down to Roughton for a week at Christmas," he said. "I shall want to see my mother."

"Naturally," said Oliver.

Rex set his chin. It was no use beating about the bush any longer.

"I shouldn't be here in any case," he said. "I feel a perfect brute, but there it is. I've taken a couple of rooms for myself in Brompton Square, and I'm going to move over there in a day or two. There's nobody in the world whom I would sooner be with than you, and you know that perfectly well. But you make demands on me, Oliver."

"Never," said Oliver.

"It's a demand on me to know that you're devoted to me, a tacit one if you like, but still a demand. You remind me always of my bankruptcy."

"And that bores you," said Oliver.

"No; it's because I won't allow it to bore me that I know I am right in going away. It's no use trying to put it into words. I know perfectly well the quality of your affection for me, but I haven't got that sort of feeling for anybody. There are two people, you and my mother, whom I'm really fond of, but there's some beastly devil inside me, who bangs the doors in the face of you both, and will be served first. He insists on my leading my own life, and not being wrapped up in anybody else. Some day I suppose a girl of some sort will come along, and tweak him by the nose, and he'll have to turn out. And then, when I ask her to marry me, she will probably laugh in my face, and say she would sooner die than mate with such an infernal egoist. All my energy, and I'm bubbling with it, has got short-circuited, I suppose, and just pours into myself and my own schemes and my own needs. I always take: I never give."

Rex had no hesitation in stating that, for his selfishness was quite unmixed with vanity. There was that great black iron mill, always relentlessly making grist for him out of the affection of others, an ugly object, and why not say so? He was made like that; perhaps by his very heartlessness he attracted and aroused the affection of others. But he was not in the least conceited: he never thought of himself as an object of admiration to others, nor did he in the least admire himself; that was their business. And Oliver attended to that business wonderfully well; quite apart from Rex's physical splendour, there was the sense of his having something wholly beautiful in

reserve, and every now and then he let slip some enchanting glimpse of it. And even now, as he gave this dryly pessimistic account of himself, Oliver caught the gleam of it.

"Yes, you're all that, Rex," he said, "but that's not all of you. There's something else, and I really believe you're rather ashamed of it. I can't tell you what it is, but it's the thing that makes you love the empty beach, and your mother, and, after all, me. And it is certainly what makes other people, oh, hosts of them, so fearfully attracted by you."

Rex waved his hands wildly.

"Oh, for God's sake——" he said.

"Don't be frightened: I've done, for I hate gush and slosh just as much as you. And as for my wanting to keep you here, if you feel you'll be happier burning your own brimstone by yourself, I should be an awful poor kind of friend if I tried to keep you, or even wanted you to stop. I'm sorry it is so, but I should be the most incomparable ass if I behaved as if it wasn't. . . ."

Oliver went to the table where glasses and liquids gleamed, and poured out something for himself.

"Here's luck to you when you go, and welcome to you whenever you come back," he said.

Chapter V

REX had just finished breakfast, and though the clock of the Brompton parish church had chimed ten, no semblance of daylight came into his sitting-room. Outside a thick December fog had descended on the town, and looking from his windows he was barely able to see by the light of the lamps in the square the gaunt tree-trunks with branches that seemed to writhe as if poisoned by the acrid air, and the illuminated windows in the

houses opposite blurred and dim through the fog. The vapours had leaked in through the chinks of sills and window-joints, and though he had his electric lights burning, and the fire prospered briskly in his grate, the corners of the room and areas away from the direct rays were shrouded by a brown obscurity, which smelt of soot. But no depressing influence of the day's darkness found leakage into Rex's mind: he looked forward to a day uninterrupted except for such business as he had made for himself.

The legal term was over, and according to his original plan he would have gone down to Roughton this morning for a short Christmas holiday. Mr. Goodwin, so his mother had told him, was not at all well, and very difficult . . . Rex did not anticipate much pleasure from the visit. But in the atmospheric conditions to which he awoke, it would clearly be a matter of difficulty to get to the station, and his strong inclination to put off his departure had made that difficulty appear insuperable. A few deft questions to his landlady, who subtly led, had pronounced it next to impossible to get a taxi, or to do anything useful with it even if he did, had justified him in sending a sufficiently veracious telegram to his mother about this unparalleled fog and the hopelessness of catching his train. There was, so he could not help remembering, an afternoon train 'Saturdays only,' but how excusable that such a detail should have escaped him! Besides, he had said he would come by the morning train. . . . To-morrow, moreover, was Sunday, and his father strongly discountenanced travelling on that day unless under the most urgent need. He would thus get a couple of days to himself, instead of the rather dismal family Sunday at Roughton. 'This God-sent fog,'

he murmured to himself as he drew his chair close to the hearth, and permitted himself a half-hour of idleness over ruminations and the daily paper, in order to accentuate to his mind the joys of solitary liberty.

He had now been over a month in these quiet little quarters, the demerits of which were so vastly outweighed by their advantages. There was generally an odour on the stairs which could be broadly characterized as 'rabbit'; there was an exuberant piano next door, and an exiguous geyser in the bathroom, but these inconveniences, even though they came on the heels of his Sybaritic existence in Pont Street, passed almost unnoticed. For in Pont Street, even if there was no smell of rabbit on the stairs, there was often Mrs. Barnard trespassing there, and though douches and nickel-plated taps embellished the bathroom, Oliver would rattle at the door-handle and ask him to turn on the hot-water again when he had finished. He had no need to assure himself of his affection for Oliver; that was as real as anything in his thoroughly genuine nature; but it was accompanied by no sort of surrender of himself, or the desire for his unlimited companionship. Often and often, indeed on the majority of nights since he had established himself here, he had dined in Pont Street neither solely nor pre-eminently because an excellent free dinner awaited him there, but because Oliver was there. Often, too, he lingered there till midnight, but it was with a quickened step and exhilarated anticipation that he returned here again, usually to put in a couple of hours' work before he went to bed, and always to revel in this sense of liberty.

This morning that was his to the highest degree: not only had the God-sent fog delayed his departure for Norfolk, but he had seen Oliver off yesterday to spend a

couple of weeks with his mother on the Riviera. Was it brutal to be definitely aware that he was pleased at that? Rex could not help it if it was, and he knew he liked knowing that by no manner of possibility could Oliver intrude on these two days. After his return from Norfolk there would be another week here before Oliver came back, and by the end of that time Rex felt sure he would be extremely glad to see him.

He had allowed a fortnight to pass since the night when he first met Mrs. Winton, before he availed himself of her invitation to go to see her. She had talked to him that first evening under cover of the lightest nonsense, with a frankness about herself that seemed to expect a corresponding frankness on his part, and to assume the right of exploration. Exploration, it appeared from the short salient analysis which Leonard Hobhouse had given him, was a favourite pastime of hers, and he had coupled with it the advice that Rex should keep something up his sleeve, if he wanted to get on well with her. But he found, after keeping his entire self, so to speak, up his own sleeve for a fortnight, that he was himself bitten by the desire for exploration. On her part, she had shown no sign of any sort; she had not followed up her permission that he should call on her with any encouraging reminder, and if she was always curious about a new thing, she certainly kept her curiosity well in control. This, no doubt, increased his own, and the effect was that a couple of weeks ago he had made his call on her, and a day or two afterwards was bidden to dinner. There was no one else there except himself, but he was not expected, so she at once informed him, to bore himself with her unrelieved company all the evening, for she had tickets for some *révue*, and they would

go there just when they felt disposed. That was the advantage of a *révue*, it didn't matter what you missed, since it was totally unintelligible as far as plot went, even if you arrived before the original lifting of the curtain, and made a Bible of your programme. There was always an English battleship in the first act with a comic captain, and a scene in a Japanese tea garden in the second, with geishas and midshipmen of not quite the usual shape. Then the idea of the *révue* somehow faded, and they had sat over dinner, and after that over the fire, and it was ten o'clock before the slipping minutes were noticed. She had been easy and casual and comrade-like, strolling over the fields of current topics with a light and eclectic tread, and had not asked Rex a single question to which the answer demanded any sort of self-revelation. It was a pity from her point of view—this was the only allusion to his tardiness in coming to see her—that he had not come sooner, for next day she was off into the country, and would not be back till a few days before Christmas. However—must he be going already ?—she would make known to him her return, and if she hadn't bored him beyond forgiveness with this solitary evening (his own fault, by the way, for not keeping an eye on the time) she would make another onslaught on his hermit-life. She had not made the slightest effort to keep him, or alluded to the comparative earliness of the hour, she had taken him at his word, and within two minutes of his saying that he must be going, he was in the street.

With a little grunt of impatience over the time he had wasted in thinking over absolutely trivial memories, Rex pushed back his chair from the warmth and glitter of the fire, which, like a sunshine, seemed to draw out hidden odours from his mind, and settled himself down to

his work. He brought to it, with all his abounding energy and passion for accomplishment, the untiring patience of a gem-cutter. The play-writer was not like a novelist, who could analyse for the reader, and lecture about his puppets : the puppets, by their own speech (and sparingly at that) had to explain themselves, and by their manner of speech unerringly etch their individuality, and this long undisturbed morning would be well spent if he could put life and the timbre of the appropriate voice into a couple of pages of dialogue already written. He was afraid he had let himself slip into the rôle of lecturer, allowing himself to talk and explain, instead of letting his characters be their own architects. Then there were the deadly dangers of brilliant dialogue to guard against : his puppets must not sit round and make epigrams and paradoxes, for could anything be so tedious as the scintillations with which dramatists of the 'nineties dazzled their bewildered audiences ? It was characteristic of the very few in real life to indulge in rapier thrust-and-parry, while if every one did it, the whole thing became a mere conjuring-trick. Situations were not the more dramatic because they were developed in speech unlike anything ever uttered by the mouth of man ; it was not by pyrotechnical brilliance that people characterized themselves into precision and distinctiveness. There was Mrs. Winton, bristling with intelligence and perception ; you knew that the moment she spoke, but how ?

Rex sank through the surface of these generalities into the depths of his work, erasing, amending, restoring, saying phrases aloud to test their spoken value, so absorbed in his task that an hour and more went by without his consciously coming to the surface again. Then with a sudden relaxation of the tension, he threw down his pen,

and lying back in his chair, stretched himself till his shoulder-joints creaked underneath their cushion of muscle. His electric light still burned close to his page, but now he turned it out, for the fog had lightened and a red copper sun gleamed through the branches of the trees outside, and ruddily kindled the spikes of hoar-frost that outlined the edges of the railings round the garden of the square. How lucky this clearing had not taken place an hour ago : if it had, he would now be speeding towards the exigencies of domestic life instead of sitting close in this nest of solitary privacy. Of course it would be very delightful to see his mother again : he would do that on Monday. . . .

He turned back to his work, but now the sense of absorption which had enveloped him before would not close round him again. The lifting of the darkness and this ever-brightening gleam of winter sunshine seemed to have broken the spell of his secret isolation, and he sat trying to recapture it. But it was no use : other topics and interests came dripping in as through holes and interstices in his concentration, and as fast as he plugged up one another began to demand repair. He thought of Oliver now speeding through the cypresses and sunshine of the South ; he almost wished him back again just for an hour to read him the completed first act of his play : he thought of the house on the quay at Roughton, basking, you might be sure, in the pale brilliance of the winter sun, and almost wished that just for an hour or two he could stray along the beach and breathe that chilly invigorating air spiced with sea-scent. . . . Then he heard from below the thin tinkle of the door-bell, and quite independently of any conscious train of thought, there flashed into his mind some image of Mrs. Winton,

due about now to return from her country visit. He did not seriously connect that ringing of the bell with her, for nothing could be less likely than that she should come here, and no doubt the mere notion of a caller had suggested her. It was far more probable that this was the postman with a parcel, but certainly the image had presented itself to him of her standing on the doorstep. Then there came the creak of the maid's step on the stairs, and the message that Mrs. Winton was below, and would come up just for one minute if he was not very busy. . . .

"But a brain-wave, an authentic and remarkable brain-wave," he said next moment as she entered. "I knew it was you."

She was dressed in a heavy fur-coat, the collar of which was turned up, so that her mouth was quite concealed. But her eyes were visible and looking at them now for the first time in daylight, he remembered his belief that they would prove to be sapphire blue, and saw he was not mistaken. As she turned down her collar, they glanced this way and that over the dusky-patterned walls, the long chair by the fire, the littered table. Though no communication had passed between them since their last meeting, she seemed to have come much nearer to him during her absence. It was perfectly natural that she should have dropped in on him like this. . . .

"I have done an unpardonable thing," she said, "in invading you. But I was shopping close by, and so instead of telephoning to you, I stopped for a minute. Really, Rex, I will not detain you longer than it would have taken you to go to the telephone."

Her use of his Christian name seemed just as natural as her appearance. It would have been odd, to his mind, if she hadn't called him by it.

He laughed.

"The telephone is a long way off," he said, "and I should certainly have chattered at it. You must sit down for five minutes."

"Not I! I will stand here at the utmost for three, while I collect some of your lovely hot fire underneath my cloak. I can have brain-waves too, and I am wonderfully aware that your soul is cursing me for my interruption. There is your writing spread out, you were in the middle of it when I came in. The ink of your last words isn't dry yet."

Rex passed his hand across the page and held up his fingers.

"I've absolutely finished for the present," he said. "For the last half-hour I've sat doing nothing."

She had opened her cloak to the blaze of the fire, but even as he spoke she wrapped it round her again.

"The ink in your brain isn't dry yet, anyhow," she said. "Now I'm going to ask you a question and you must promise to give me a true answer. It will be no good lying, by the way. I shall instantly detect the false ring."

"Then I needn't promise," said Rex.

"Yes, you must. If you don't speak the truth, I shall have a hold over you. The question is whether you would like or hate to dine with me to-night."

"Like," said Rex. "Have you any hold over me?"

She laughed.

"I can't say I have. But you may be a slippery customer. My dear, what a cosy little den. That's the secret of comfort, to have all you need and nothing more. More spoils it all."

"That's quite true in this case. The piano next door and the essence of rabbit on the stairs spoil it all."

"They don't spoil your look of intense content. You look like a boy just home for his holidays."

"More like a boy who's not yet home for his holidays," said he. "I was going down to Norfolk this morning, but my landlady, successfully hypnotized to say the right thing, told me I couldn't possibly get to the station while the fog was on. My train was off before it was."

"I am the gainer then, for I shouldn't have caught you otherwise. I got back only yesterday. Now I'm off, and you will perjure yourself if you tell me you want me to stop. A quarter past eight."

As he came back into his room after seeing her to the door, he remembered that she had given him her hand as she said 'au revoir'; and then vividly he remembered that she had never done so before at their previous meetings and partings. It had seemed rather characteristic of her to dispense with that: 'Why, after all,' Rex could imagine her saying, 'should we claw and dab at each other to show we're going away?' He was beginning now to map her out in his mind; she was emerging from the fluidity of early acquaintanceship, when all sorts of cross-currents seem to run counter to each other, and there are no fixed points to be charted; pieces of solid land, he thought, were appearing. One of these was to hold herself aloof from contact with casual passengers who might be journeying with her for an hour or two, and to reserve whatever she had to give or reveal for such as had passed a certain probation. People who meant little to her, he guessed, meant nothing to her, though what her friends meant to her, or she to them he had at present no idea. Or had she few intimate relationships? Was she, as Leonard Hobhouse had hinted, primarily an Athenian, eager to know a new thing, and, possibly, to discard it as

soon as it was known? With him, anyhow, she had taken the slightly unusual step of calling uninvited and unheralded, and at the end had abandoned her aloofness in this hand of greeting. Did that mean that she had, to ever so slight a degree, beckoned him out of the casual crowd? Certainly she had kindled his curiosity, and at the same time had given him so little to satisfy it, that he had no idea whether he even liked her or not. She had charm, but he was not sure that she charmed him. She was certainly mail-clad, and just as certainly he wanted to penetrate that armour, and find out what really lay there.

Rex had somehow led himself to suppose that he was to have another *tête-à-tête* with his hostess that night, and it was a surprise to find a man's hat and coat in the bright warmth of her hall. The hall was fragrant with some aromatic smell, and he saw that this came from a joss-stick burning in the hand of a monstrous Chinese idol that squatted on the mantelpiece. He was shown into the drawing-room and found that his fellow-guest was Leonard Hobhouse, who was sitting unceremoniously in a big chair while his hostess stood. This gave him the impression of an intimacy between the two, which he had not suspected, for Leonard had certainly spoken of her with marked detachment.

"There you are!" she said. "Your arrival is a great relief to Leonard—you know each other, do you not?—I have been teasing him: I have been letting him think that he and I would be alone, and he has been clumsily trying to appear pleased."

Leonard turned in his chair.

"Rex, go away," he said, "you're not in the bargain. Anyhow, if it's you, where's Oliver? They're the Siamese

twins, you know, Dora, but far more agreeable to look at than Siamese. Produce Oliver."

"Oliver went to the Riviera yesterday," said Rex.

"Otherwise I should have asked him," said Mrs. Winton. "Rex, did you notice the incense in the hall? I put it there on purpose for fear it should smell of rabbit."

"Rabbit?" asked Leonard.

"Yes, my dear. We don't like rabbits in the hall. Let us come in to dinner. And there isn't a piano next door, Rex."

Rex felt that she was giving Leonard a misleading impression about the extent of his own familiarity with her. It was true that they had spoken of a rabbit-smell and an adjacent piano, but this allusiveness somehow implied that little private jokes and understandings were customary between them. Rex was far from objecting to it; it implied that she too, as he himself had already done, felt that they had made some advance in intimacy since their last meeting. Had the thought of him lain mellowing in her mind, advancing towards some ripeness of friendship? The idea of that pleased him: she welcomed him as not a probationer any longer but an accepted comrade, one who was at home in this warm bright-lighted flat, smelling of incense for his private use. There were pink roses in cut glass on the table, the silver sparkled, soft-footed servants were noiseless and deft, and he contrasted this luxurious comfort with the thought of the evening he would otherwise have spent. He would have stoked himself with indifferent viands at some small neighbouring restaurant, and hurried back to his small room, draughty if the window was opened, stuffy if it was closed. To be sure, he would have been alone and master of his own time and thoughts, but it was certainly pleasant to be surrounded again with all the comforts which were

natural to wealth. And there were no demands on him here, such as had made him desert the house in Pont Street for his solitude on which no one had any claims. He was here just to enjoy himself, to eat and drink, and indulge his desire to be agreeable to his friendly hostess.

He smiled back at her : here was another private signal that could pass between them for the mystification of Leonard.

" I believe you had the piano removed," he said.

" True. It was taken away in a van because you were coming. I had to make up to you for your missing your train this morning. What a day it must have been down at Roughton ! A fog in London always means crystalline clearness of winter sun in the country. Why do we live in such a black hole of pestilence ? What would Roughton have looked like to-day, Rex ? "

Rex's eyes sparkled. He wondered if he enjoyed the imaginative thought of Roughton more than he would have enjoyed its actuality.

" Oh, ever so empty," he said, " and brimful of pale sunshine. The shingle shining with dew, and the sand strong blue from the reflection of the sky. The redshanks piping, and the great gulls barking. The heads of sea-lavender grey and dead."

" What a God-forsaken place," said Leonard.

" Ah, you're a true cockney, Leonard," said she. " The garden in Leicester Square is your utmost concession to rurality."

" I don't concede it for a moment," said he. " I should have that paved. And certainly I should cover London over with a large glass roof like a railway terminus. No mud, no wind, no rain or snow. That's my idea of the valley of Avilion. Man is gregarious, at least

I am. I don't like large empty places with dead lavender, and sea-gulls with hydrophobia."

"No, my dear, you like small full places . . ." said she, and turned again to Rex.

"You make me taste it," she said. "I swear I can taste the salt wind."

"Not a bit of it," said Leonard, "what you taste is this delicious fresh lobster."

"Leonard, you shall not spoil it for me. I swear I tasted the wind and saw the sea. And yet I don't go and live there: I expect you require to be born there to have it in the blood, as Rex has. That's part of your charm, Rex. You're a wild bird from the coast, and when you're in London you are in a cage all the time, and we look at you through the bars, and are so pleased if you let us stroke you. I saw you were wild the first time I met you."

"Oh, we're all wild," said Leonard. "We're all in cages: the cages are our own temperaments."

"No, not quite that," she said. "Our temperaments aren't external to us. They're our skin, perhaps."

"From which you can't emerge without being flayed. Skin or cage, you can't get out. Falling in love perhaps flays us temporarily, but how it smarts, and how we huddle back into our skins again."

"Nonsense, my dear," said she. "It's just the opposite. When we fall in love our skins, our temperaments become thick and horny. We're never so completely selfish as when we are in love. We become absolutely impervious: falling in love is egoism *in excelsis*. A man in love gobbles up and digests the woman: a woman in love melts the man, boils him down and daubs herself all over with the broth like—like woad."

Rex laughed.

" But she can't if they're in love with each other," he said. " She's been gobbled up and digested."

" Ah, but two people never are in love with each other like that," she said. " One is always the slayer, the other the victim. One appropriates, the other acquiesces. It's a convention, a purely imaginary one, that two people should be mutually absorbed ; novelists, poets and dramatists are entirely responsible for it. No one writes about love as it is. It wouldn't pay ; it is much too greedy and cold-blooded to form the subject of an evening's entertainment. We should all be rightly shocked to see ourselves as we are, even if the censor allowed us to. People never did fall in love with each other : they fall violently in love with themselves, and treat themselves to a mate."

" I think you're a very shocking woman," said Leonard. " You're corrupting a youthful mind."

" I'm doing nothing of the sort if you're alluding to Rex, my dear Leonard. How old are you, Rex ? "

" Twenty-three, nearly," said Rex.

" I thought so. You're of the age when you corrupt everybody else. I'm not at all sure that it's wise of Leonard and me to dine with you. I'm thirty-one : as a matter of fact I'm thirty, but I always date myself by my next birthday, and then it doesn't give one such a shock."

Rex glanced first at Leonard, then at her. They both seemed to be watching him, expecting something of him.

" I never know when you're talking nonsense and when you're not," he said.

" Give me the benefit of the doubt," said she. " Take it as sense."

" Wiser if there's a doubt to take it as nonsense," said Leonard. " It was certainly nonsense when you said that there was no such thing as falling in love on equal

terms, Dora. In the Victorian age it was the regular thing. It's only a fashion that has gone out: it will come back. We shall all live to see girls swooning again when boys propose to them, and boys telling them that they are fairies and perfect pieces of loveliness. They each made a complete self-surrender, and had enormous families. Old-fashioned just now, that's all, like respect for one's father. Mothers are booming by the way. They've come back into fashion like Jane Austen's novels."

"Ah, there's nonsense for you!" said she. "The young have always detested their parents. Why on earth should they do otherwise? It is no claim on their gratitude that their parents brought them into the world——"

"Somebody else would if they hadn't," suggested Leonard.

"Don't be flippant! But my father and mother didn't bring me into the world because they loved me. They loved each other. It was nothing to do with me. Why should it be taken for granted that I must love them?"

Leonard lit a cigarette.

"Oh, when you talk about taking things for granted, then I begin to agree with you," he said. "Taking things for granted is the stunting of all growth. It is like the little shoes that Chinese girls are shod in, and like them, it is intended to stunt growth. To lay down rules for life and thought and conduct is the unpardonable sin against Nature. The Decalogue has done more real ineradicable harm than any document of the same length since writing was invented."

She made a mock solemnity with her mouth.

"And who's corrupting Rex now?" she asked.

"My dear Dora, you firmly stated that it was his business to corrupt us. You can't have it both ways.

Besides, you and I have been talking so much that we haven't given him any opportunity. Give him a chance. Silence for the corrupter ! "

Whether they had been talking sense or nonsense, the atmosphere they had created suited Rex. It was irresponsible, it reeked of liberty, and there was some revolutionary ferment in it. What intrigued him also was their relations to each other. There had been friction between them, he guessed, for Leonard's tone was slightly hectoring, slightly resentful. . . . But it wasn't his business.

" Decalogue ? " he said. " What harm does the Decalogue do ? "

" Ah, that's youth ! " said Mrs. Winton. " Go on, Rex !"

Rex turned to her, his eyes bright with the wine of youth, radiantly Faun-like, entrancingly self-assertive.

" There's no more harm in it than in an old Bradshaw," he said, " as long as you don't try to go by the trains. Rather amusing than otherwise, to see how very slow the trains once were. Of course all rules are obsolete : you can no more guide your life by moral precepts laid down by somebody else, than you can accept artistic precepts if your taste doesn't endorse them. Naturally you can't have people stealing and murdering all over the place, but those are not moral ordinances, they are social ordinances."

Dora Winton was leaning forward, both elbows on the table with an unlighted cigarette in her fingers.

" Isn't he a darling ? " she observed parenthetically to anything handy, to her cigarette, her cup of coffee, but certainly not to Rex or Leonard. It was just her own thought, which neither expected nor asked for an audience, an exclamation merely of satisfaction with the wild handsome thing. But her comment arrested Rex, faintly irritating him.

"Oh, everybody is a darling now," he said. "It means that you're laughing at me."

"But I'm not," she said, "I'm enormously envying you, and I adore people I envy. Leonard's envying you too, only he hates the people he envies. What we both so frightfully envy is that you're eight years younger than either of us. We're old, Rex, as the way of the world goes now, and the ball is just coming to you. It's in the air: you can catch it and hold it. We can't: to be thirty means that the ball has come to you, and that you've dropped it, unless you've got something wonderful to show for it. I envy you absolutely hugely, you're alive and awake and young. That's why I called you a darling."

Leonard dropped his smoked-out cigarette end into his coffee cup. It expired with a faint hiss.

"*Requiescat in pace,*" he said. "I suppose I mean *requiescam.* I'm sure I hope I may. But I don't envy you, Rex, as Dora does. I deeply commiserate with you. Of course you don't want my sympathy."

Rex laughed.

"Why on earth should I?" he said.

"Exactly. Why should you? But you'll know when you're thirty. You'll see that on this particular evening you had all your troubles in front of you. That's why I'm sorry for you."

"And that's what he really envies you for," said Dora.

"I promise you I don't. If I was twenty-three, nearly, I should be intensely sorry for myself. I felt then as if I could do anything, and I knew I couldn't."

Dora Winton turned to Rex with a quick movement of her head.

"Being nearly twenty-three doesn't take me that

way," said he. "I shall do what I intend to do."

They had sat long over dinner and never quite settled down into the comfort of spontaneous conversation again afterwards. Whenever Leonard started a hare, she would not join in the chase, and when the Tally-ho was hers, he strolled after her, saying there was nothing to pursue. Rex was more certain than ever that there was a sore spot some-where, which made Leonard curt and irritable, and her rather freezingly courteous to him. Before long Leonard rose.

"Well, the most charming evenings come to an end," he said, "and I must be off. Coming my way, Rex?"

Rex might have gone with him, had he not said that, but he had no taste for his movements being directed.

"Oh, I'm not going anybody's way this minute," he said, "if I'm allowed to stop where I am."

She certainly granted him this with her smiling eyes and her grave mouth. "Good night, Leonard," she said. "Charming of you to have come."

He could have no excuse for lingering, with so pointed an absence of persuasion, and the two were left together. She drew her chair close up to the fire.

"Ah, that's comfortable," she said. "I always let people go the moment they say they want to. They're always fidgetty if they remain. I remember I let you go at once the first time you dined here. That's why you're not fidgetty now."

"I'm far from fidgetty," he said. "But I thought Leonard was fidgetty before he went."

She put up a hand to shelter her face from the glare in the grate. Her fingers with the blaze shining through them looked like sards.

"He was," she said, "and as our future playwright you ought to know the reason. It's a bit of wonderful male psychology. Have a guess at it. What irritates a man more than anything in the world?"

Rex knew he was being treated intimately: she would not mind his saying what was in his mind.

"Being in love with a woman who is not in love with him," he suggested.

She shook her head.

"Oh, my dear, what a bad guess," she said. "That may make a man miserable, but it doesn't irritate him. Besides, as I'm sure you meant to be personal, he isn't in the least in love with me."

"You'll have to tell me," said Rex.

"Well, it's just that. He used to be in love with me, and now he isn't. It's that which irritates a man so deeply. It isn't that I've changed, for I've always liked him immensely, and never been one atom in love with him. But because he has changed, he's prodigiously vexed with me. There's a point for the playwright. It's extremely subtle, and absolutely true. A man's worst quarrel with a woman is when he has once been in love with her, and no longer is. That always seems to him perfectly unpardonable of her."

"And does the converse hold?"

"Bless you, no! When a woman has been in love with a man, and ceases to be, she's delighted that she's free. And oddly enough, she feels ever so warmly towards him. I know that from experience. I simply adored my husband Charles Roley. That ceased, and I found myself liking him immensely. He, on the other hand, to whom exactly the same thing happened, was furious with me. He thought it so abominable of me

that he was no longer in love with me, that he became quite outrageous, poor dear. I understood: I sympathized! But it was all very unsettling and worrying, and I made up my mind never to fall in love again, or marry anyone who was in love with me. That's why I refused to marry Leonard."

She paused a moment.

"So there's a crayon picture of myself for you," she said. "I think we're going to be friends, and if we are, t's as well that you should know first what kind of person I am. I'm amiable without being amorous. I don't want to fall in love with anybody, and I want nobody to fall in love with me."

She laughed, taking down her sheltering hand, and showed him a face full of candour and merriment.

"The latter, I am bound to say, seems a somewhat needless proviso," she said. "I have been towed like a peaceful Temeraire into my last berth."

She switched off on to some absurd story which her last remark had suggested, and pointed to the tray of syphons and spirits which had been brought in.

"Help yourself, Rex," she said, "and then you shall talk. No, I'm not sure that you shall. I have a last word yet. Such an odd one, too, for the first moment, but so sensible if you think it over."

She let him establish himself again before she spoke.

"I'm leaving England in a few days' time," she said, "to spend a month on the Riviera, and you would do me a great kindness if you would come and live at this flat while I am away. There's nothing so bad for servants as to be left with nothing to do; they get lazy and quarrelsome. It really is quite comfortable, the cook's decent, you'll be quite well looked after, you'll

have all the privacy of your rooms in Brompton Square, and I'll give orders there shall be no rabbits on the stairs. All I want you to do is to have as many meals here as is convenient in order to keep them all up to the mark. You'll be doing me a great kindness."

In a flash Rex saw himself living here in comfort and quiet, as secure from interruption as in his own little cubby-hole. He would have all the luxurious conveniences of the house in Pont Street without any of the duties of a guest, and he would be relieved of the expense of a month's rent. But how could he pay for the admirable food which would no doubt appear at the 'many meals'? A dinner such as he had had to-night would cost him three days' board.

"That's most awfully kind of you," he said. "But I'm afraid my purse wouldn't run to many meals, as your decent cook interprets meals."

She stared at him a moment.

"I'll make out a bill for your dinner this evening," she said. "I must send Leonard's after him. Let me see! Did you have a liqueur with your coffee?"

This was sufficiently clear then. He jumped up.

"I would simply love to come," he said.

"That's capital: thanks so much, Rex. You'll be staying with me and I shan't be having the bother of entertaining you. Mind you keep the household up to the mark. You must sacrifice yourself to the extent of having a friend or two to dinner at least twice a week."

"Am I such an outrageous hermit?" he asked.

"The worst I've ever seen. You admit nobody into your cell, so Oliver told me."

Rex had a perfectly certain intuition.

"Did Oliver really say that?" he asked.

She raised her eyes to his face, quite untroubled by the question.

"No," she said. "He never said anything of the kind. But that's what Oliver feels. Whether he says it or not is quite immaterial."

"Oliver's a darling," he said.

"Like everybody else?" she asked.

"No, quite a special one."

"You must miss him tremendously," she said.

Rex, as he was credited with having a cell, retreated into it. He had no taste for telling her that he did not miss Oliver at all. Explanation would be necessary, an admission of her into his cell, or at least the giving her a peep through the window.

"I miss him immensely," he said. "But it's an unearthly hour, Mrs. Winton. I've been keeping you up."

She rose.

"I've liked being kept up," she said. "Good-bye, my dear. I shall be gone before you come back from your beloved Norfolk."

"And thanks most awfully," said he.

Chapter VI

REX did not extend his visit home for a further couple of days in order to compensate himself or others for his detention by the fog. For his own part, he gave up those days quite cheerfully, and he was not sure that even his mother wanted him to prolong his stay, while as for his father, he saw as never before how essentially Mr. Goodwin disliked him. His father was clearly not well; though the winter weather was bright and bracing, he took none of his accustomed strapping walks, nor went out shooting; his physical activity was

limited to a saunter round the garden, or a stroll, bent and heavy-footed, along the quay. He soon got tired, and at tea or after dinner would fall asleep in his chair, and wake with some fault-finding observation. For a man of his energy these were strange habits; he had given up his early risings, often coming down to breakfast after the others had finished, and his behaviour was of a man grown suddenly old, or one carefully husbanding his strength. More than once, too, he flew into a violent passion over some trivial inconvenience, and then, recovering himself with an effort, sat with flaming colour, trembling and panting in his chair. Rex's presence was a constant and vivid irritation to him; if he spoke, his father found some snubbing contradiction for him: if he was silent, some acid condolence about the dullness of his days down here, compared to the distractions of London. With his wife he was hardly more amenable; whatever she did was wrong, and as he snapped at her, her eyes would seek Rex's in some unspoken appeal, which besought him to be patient and indulgent. . . .

Mr. Goodwin had gone out for his pottering stroll one morning, curtly refusing her companionship, and she came to Rex in his den.

"My dear, you are being good," she said. "You see as well as I do that there's something very wrong with your father, and you're awfully gentle with him. Oh, Rex, I'm so anxious about him."

She sat down close to him.

"I'm not worrying you, am I?" she asked. "Are you sure you don't want to do some reading or writing?"

Rex turned round from the table where he had just established himself, and put all his imaginative powers

into the task of sympathy. His father, ill or well, was a marvel of disagreeableness, but that was outside the question now. He had to make himself eager and sensitive on behalf of his mother, using in that service all the little artifices which meant so much to her love. They were instinctive enough as regards her, but quite meaningless as regards the cause of her trouble. No doubt that made them cheap, but it was too late to remedy that.

"Worrying me, indeed!" he said. "When you make yourself a nuisance I'll tell you. Now we're going to have a talk, and to talk comfortably you must be comfortable. Take the big chair. Wait, I'll pull it up to the fire. There! . . ."

He sat himself on the hearth-rug by her, and poked the fire into a blaze.

"Now tell me all about it," he said. "Father's ill: anyone can see that. Have you asked him what's the matter? Have you suggested his seeing anybody?"

Rex could make her feel that he was part of her, bone of her bone, and heart of her heart, when he behaved like this. All those little arrangements for her comfort were so dear to her as outward signs of his love.

"Ah, what a comfort you are," she said. "I've had no one to talk to. I've urged and urged him to see somebody, but it only makes him vexed with me. What I feel is that from his own medical knowledge he knows what's the matter, and I'm sure he thinks it very serious. But if I ask him, he only says that he is perfectly well."

"How long has it been going on?" asked Rex.

"All the autumn. He has lost all his energy, and I know he's very often in great pain. I woke two nights ago, and found him sitting up in bed, gasping for breath.

He had lit a candle, and I saw his face and it was wet and white with pain. He is ashamed of pain and illness; they make him angry. He is so hard on himself."

"But why won't he see a doctor?" said Rex.

"I think it's because he knows there is something horribly wrong, and he doesn't want to be told so. And he hates to give in. He would sooner go on till he broke, rather than bend. And all his self-control is centred on that, he has no force left for anything else. You have seen how if a thing vexes him, he breaks out into a passion over it, and that brings on an attack of pain and exhaustion. And one never can tell what will vex him. He sees my anxiety for him and he dislikes that, and I can't help being anxious."

She was silent a moment and stroked his hair.

"Oh, my beloved son," she said, "I've got you. Whatever is God's will about him, there's you, my darling, and the fact of you means just everything to me. Wherever you are I know you're with me. There's no need of words between us, Rex, because we both know what we are to each other. But just for my own relief I wanted to tell you how full of fear I am. I'm making you my confessor. I know how feebly and wrongly I am behaving, for no good ever came out of fear, and I mustn't be afraid. Whatever happens, your hand is in mine, and I clasp it, and I find such comfort and help in it. And we're in God's care, Rex, and no want of realization of that on our part can alter it. However faithless and uncomprehending we are, He won't let go of us."

Rex let his silence answer for him, reinforcing it by the pressure of his hand on her knees. He was sorry for his father's suffering and illness, but he knew that in reality, it and whatever it threatened, meant nothing to

him, except as regards his mother. He had never had any love for his father which alone could have overcome his dislike of him. His being ill did not endear him, and the prospect of his death gave Rex no real regret that the relationship between them had not been closer. He or his father or both of them would have had to be quite different people, if they were to have been fond of each other. He did not excuse himself, but he did not blame himself. He felt himself in some sort of prison impregnably darkened from any sunshine of affection for his father or of his mother's faith. But for her sake he must let her assume that he participated in both. His silence and the close pressure of his hand did that for him.

"There's yet another thing," he said after a while. "I don't think I do any good here, I think in fact I do harm. I seem to irritate my father, and I'm sure he doesn't want me. But if you want me I'll stop over till next week. If not, I shall go back on the day I originally fixed."

She took up his hand in both of hers.

"Oh, Rex, I want you always," she said. "Isn't it silly of me to tell you that? But I've got you wherever you are. And your father isn't himself. It's his illness that makes him critical and contradictory towards you. You mustn't think that it's he. Don't you remember how pleased he was with you in the summer, when you got up early and worked in his study? Think of him like that. As it is——"

Inwardly Rex said to himself, "Thank goodness I'll get away on Friday then. . . ." But he let no trace of that appear in his voice.

"I see," he said. "I quite agree. I understand all you mean. I'll go back at the end of this week then."

Presently he was telling her this and that about his

life in town. There was a great deal that could be told of the friendly house where he had stayed so long when he first went up to London, of his settling into the rooms in Brompton Square, where, he candidly acknowledged, he found his independence sweeter than the fleshpots and friendship of Pont Street. Oliver's absence could be lamented, and his speedy return looked forward to. He sketched out the tedious hours in the solicitor's office, and the ecstatic return to a solitary evening, and his work on the second play. He made light of the refusal of his first effort, which was again in the hands of another theatrical manager and awaited his verdict. His mother must think of him as always busy and always interested, and as enjoying his solitary evenings even more than those on which he dined out with friends he had made at Oliver's house. But on one point he was absolutely silent: he did not tell her that when he went back to town, he would not go to his rooms in Brompton Square, but to the flat in Mount Street, where he would be so sumptuously lodged and boarded at the charges of its absent mistress. It was wiser to conceal that: the knowledge of it, he knew, would vaguely trouble his mother, who with the zeal of love, would want to know all about Mrs. Winton, and learn the rather unusual circumstances in which Rex had come into possession. She would certainly be determined to trust him, but beneath her confidence there would be disquietude. The wiser course was to tell her nothing.

It was with the sense of holiday and of escape that he found himself in London again, and with the sense of festival that he spent his first solitary evening in the flat in Mount Street. There was the discreet butler to

welcome him, and to enquire when he would like to have dinner, to take the keys of his luggage from him, and softly vanish again. A bright fire burned in the little writing-room off the hall, another would be lit in the drawing-room if he desired it, but Mrs. Winton had thought he would be more comfortable in the small room. All the smooth luxury which wealth makes automatic surrounded him, and when the late post arrived there was a note of welcome to her 'caretaker,' so Mrs. Winton phrased his occupancy, with the information that she would not be back in England for another six weeks, and the hope that if he was comfortable, he would remain in charge till then. It pleased Rex immensely to be cosy and *perdu* here ; no one in the world, except her servants, knew of his whereabouts, and his momentary impulse to ring up Oliver, who was probably back by now, did not suffice to make him go to the telephone. After the frictions and anxieties of Norfolk, he wanted nothing except to enjoy an industrious tranquillity, undisturbed by any call of affection or duty, and to revel in the sense of his complete independence. That this independence was really dependent on his absent hostess did not trouble him at all, for it pleased her, as she had restated in her letter, to think that he was staying with her, and that she had no responsibility towards her guest. . . . After dinner he would get to work again on his play, but just for this hour it was occupation enough to realize his conditions. It was even pleasant now that he had made his escape from that stricken house at Roughton, to recollect how disagreeable it had been, how his father's illness and ill-temper had hung like a fog over it all, so that there was no joy in the shining tides and the dewy marsh. He was sorry

for his mother's anxiety, but he had done all in his power to help her, had offered to stay on if that would be any comfort to her, and if he rejoiced in her expressed wish that he should not, he could not conceivably blame himself for that. . . . Rex dismissed that gloomy week from his mind.

He wanted nobody just now. Certainly not his father, nor yet his mother, nor Oliver. Two of those three were they who out of all the world made any difference to him and entered into the web and tissue of his life, but if a wish would have brought either of them no sighed echo of it would have escaped his lips. Then there was his hostess, and though she meant less than either of them to him, he smiled to himself as he thought that if a wish would have brought her in to dine with him, he would have given utterance to it, provided that it was stipulated that she should go away very soon after. He certainly liked her room better than her company: he would sooner be in possession of her flat than be allowed to come to see her there. But there was something intriguing about her; he was interested in her in a way he was not interested in Oliver and his mother. He knew all about them: the salient feature about both (highly to be appreciated) was their devotion to himself. But where did he stand with regard to Mrs. Winton? To live here in her flat postulated that there was some kind of relation, existent or anticipated, between them.

Rex delayed the resumption of his work after dinner for a further meditation on this subject. He rejected at once the idea that she was in the least in love with him. She had told him quite definitely, and, so he thought now, with the clear purpose of making their relations more easy and comrade-like, that she did not

want her life to be complicated by disturbing emotions. On his side he could assure himself that he was not the least in love with her, nor did he feel himself ever so imperceptibly drifting in that direction. She interested him immensely, but the very quality of that interest contained an antidote to any tenderer feeling, for it chiefly consisted of curiosity about her. And he could find no key which fitted into the wards of her behaviour towards him : she had evidently from their first meeting sought him ; she had encouraged and drawn him out to show himself to her, and finally, as if satisfied by what she had found, she had made him these munificent arrangements, so that at her expense for weeks together he was to live in this provided luxury. Of course she was rich, but however rich you were, you did not board and lodge a chance young man for the mere pleasure of making him comfortable unless you felt a sensible warmth towards him, or wished to express appreciation of his sensible warmth towards you. The more Rex puzzled over the pleasant thing which had been done to him, the more inexplicable it appeared. It seemed childish to accept her account of the matter, and consider that it was worth her while to put him in clover here merely in order that he should keep an eye on the tillers of the ground ; it was even more childish, he thought, not to be able to hit on a reasonable explanation.

The next day was Saturday, and since his house of legal bondage would not be open, he went off after lunch to his discarded lodgings in Brompton Square to remove to Mount Street such effects as he had left there, and to direct that all letters and messages received there should be forwarded to his new quarters. He had some stationery there with the address on it, and scribbled a note to his

mother concerning his arrival with just such little blunt words of sympathy and enquiry as were natural to him. She would read into his bluntness the reality of his affection for her. The thought that he would have to continue keeping up this deception as to his whereabouts went vaguely against the grain, but the reason for his not having told her of his changed quarters still held good. Considering that he himself did not in the least understand the conditions which led to his being in Mount Street, there was no possibility of her doing so, and indeed she would certainly be troubled by the dangerous interpretation (dangerous was exactly what she would feel about it) which he knew he was right to reject . . . After the luxury and comfort of his morning in the flat, the bright tiled bathroom, the delicate meals, and the quiet orderliness of his sitting-room, the dingy stuffiness of his old quarters seemed intolerable, and he wondered how the mere escape from the calls made by friendship and hospitality in Pont Street could have made this freedom so sweet. All the same, if now he had to choose between staying here and going back to Pont Street, he knew that he would have chosen to stay.

He heard, as he was packing the clothes and papers he had left here, the jingle of the telephone just below, and presently the maid came to say that Mr. Barnard who had called here yesterday was asking for him. Oliver, so it now appeared, had returned only the afternoon before, leaving his mother and sister at Nice, and wouldn't Rex come and dine early and go to the play, or dine late and go to nothing at all, but just sit and talk. . . . Rex pondered a moment. Of course Oliver would have to know what had happened. Even if he was not told now, he would be sure to drop in very soon, and

would feel reasonably aggrieved at the senseless secrecy. Yet how delightful secrecy was. . . . Rex put his mouth to the little black sink with holes in the bottom.

"Yes, we'll dine together," he said. "That'll be jolly. But you must come and dine with me. Not here, by the way, but 23A, Mount Street. I've shifted."

"23A, Mount Street," said a wheezing voice. "Why that's Mrs. Winton's."

"Bright lad. Eight then, Oliver."

Rex had ordained by way of keeping the housemaid's hand in, that they would use the drawing-room that evening, and the fire was bright, the evening paper ironed and folded and there were fresh flowers in the vases when Oliver was shown in. At present he knew nothing whatever about Rex's occupancy, and had formulated a resolve to ask him nothing about it. The whole thing seemed odd: he had puzzled himself over the conditions under which Rex's installation had taken place, and it was clearly a counsel of wisdom and delicacy to put no questions. It had been obvious to him, on the only occasion on which he had seen them together, that Mrs. Winton was considerably interested in Rex, but beyond that he knew nothing. She was an irresponsible, enigmatic person; not so long ago it had been supposed that she was going to marry Leonard, and then—well, she didn't.

Rex gave him an enthusiastic welcome.

"Oh, but this is ripping," he said. "Oliver, you've been away for ages. You're brown too: you've lived in the sun, while we've been living in a cold wet cellar. Dinner ready? Let's go in. Take my arm: we'll behave with pomp."

Rex bubbled and chattered throughout dinner, but made no allusion to his occupation of the flat. He was altogether radiant and enchanting, weaving with effortless ease the spell which was so individually his. The news from Norfolk, he said, with a momentary clouding of his effulgence, would wait till afterwards. Yes, not good news, but never mind that now. . . .

"Tell me all you've been doing, Oliver," he said. "I want to hear about your mother and Sybil, and your luck at the tables. Of course you won: rich people always do. To him that hath shall be given, while as to poor beggars like me, the shirts are taken off their backs. We mustn't pity them though: their fault for being beggars. I dislike unfortunate and ailing people. So did David: 'the lame and the blind which are hated of David's soul.' Now be quick and tell me all the delightful things that have happened to you, or I shall begin to talk again."

"Well, first of all, I missed you," began Oliver.

"That's delightful for me," said Rex. "I like being missed. And after that you ceased to miss me, which was delightful for you."

Oliver looked at him quite gravely.

"No, I never ceased to miss you," he said. "However, as I've got you now——"

"Don't be too sure. I may be somebody you're dreaming about and so am quite unreal. Yet there's that Japanese proverb, 'I know that what I call reality is illusion, so perhaps my dreams are real.' There or thereabouts. Go on about the tables: they're real enough."

"I started by winning ten thousand francs, and nearly bought you a box of preserved fruits."

"And then lost them again, so I'm giving you dinner."

"Yes, a jolly good one too. But I lost twenty thousand directly afterwards."

"Good Lord, I shall have to give you two dinners. Can't make out why people with money gamble."

"You can't gamble without," observed Oliver.

"I don't mean that. But rich people don't really care about winning, and they don't mind losing. Where's the pleasure?"

"Why, in thinking you're going to win."

"Ah, I see. Just another instance of the pleasures of anticipation being greater than those of achievement. It's always so, more's the pity. We all like getting, or thinking we're going to get, more than having. Heavens! what a lot I want, and how little I really care about what I've got."

"There're just a few things I care about which I've got," said Oliver.

"Well, let's move into enormous chairs, and you shall tell me about them. We shall talk for ever to-night. Why didn't you bring a sponge and a toothbrush, and then you could have slept here."

"Might send for them," said Oliver.

"No, I was only ragging. There's a chair for you, and I shall stand in front of the fire and look at you. Also I shall sit down at intervals, when the back of my trousers is hot. Now what have you got that you care about?"

"Oh, well: you, to begin with. A cup of fearfully good coffee to go on with."

Rex's mood suddenly changed. He sat down in his favourite position cross-legged on the hearth-rug.

"I wish to heaven then, if you have got me, you'd take me right away," he said. "I've got myself, you see, and just now and then, when I'm a little less of a

brute than usual, I get so awfully tired of myself. Quite suddenly, you know, and then I would give anything to be rid of myself. You make me feel like that sometimes, and so does my beloved mother, and so does the sunlight on the marshes. And then it passes, and I'm back in myself again, ever so cosy and contented, and caring nothing except for myself and what I can get. But there are those other moments, Oliver, damned uncomfortable ones, when I hate myself and know that I'm absolutely unworthy of all that you and my mother give me. Why either of you ever put up with me for a moment I can't imagine. And then the bad minute, which in reality is the good one, is over, and I'm scheming and grasping and planning for myself again, and don't care two straws for anybody else."

"Oh, that's not true," said Oliver.

"I wish it wasn't. About Norfolk now: I want to tell you about Norfolk, and you'll see. My father's very ill: there's something awfully wrong, and I don't really care. My mother certainly thinks he won't live, and if he dies, I believe I shall be rather glad. I shall have a freer hand: I shall have more money. I shall enjoy Roughton immensely more if he isn't there. I don't say that I want him to die: if he would go somewhere quite away, so that when I go home he won't be there, that would do. He spoils my pleasure, and I care about my pleasure more than about him. Sometimes he tries to be nice to me, and then he's an awful bore. Usually he isn't nice to me, and then I detest him."

Rex stared angrily at the fire.

"It makes such a muddle," he said. "It makes no end of reticences and falsities and play-acting. I'm genuinely sorry for my mother's anxiety, and I shall

be genuinely sorry for the awful gap there'll be in her life if my father dies. I know I shall be able to comfort her and help her by being brave and self-controlled and manly and tender—she'll think all these things of me—whereas in reality I shall have nothing to be brave and self-controlled about. I shan't care, but she will be convinced that I do care, and that's so cheap. And it would do only harm instead of good, if I told her that. Probably she couldn't believe it, but if she did she would be broken-hearted. Of course she knows that my father and I get on each other's nerves, but she believes that below all that there is love. It's exactly what there never was. It's a conventional notion that one should love one's parents . . ."

"You always like making the worst of yourself, Rex," said Oliver. "But it's not modesty, you know, it's conceit really."

"Conceit to make the worst of myself? I don't admit that I do, but even if I did, why conceit?"

"Because you enjoy the thought that you're a sort of savage, with no sense of love or affection. It's your stunt. In fact it's the stunt of our generation. Reaction, I suppose."

"Reaction from what?"

"From the last generation. Haven't you ever seen a funeral with a lot of women sitting inside the carriages holding handkerchiefs up to their noses? Their stunt was to seem to care when they didn't: ours is to say we don't care when we do."

Rex shook his head.

"Partly true," he said, "but not really true. I've got a black heart: there's no doubt about it. If I make myself agreeable and pretend to be fond of people, it's

not because I like them, but because I want to make them like me. It's useful to be liked: people do things for you. . . . But let's stop: it's rot to talk about one's soul, when probably one hasn't got one."

He jumped up.

"There's another thing," he said, "not about my soul. I expected you'd ask a lot of questions about it, but as you won't, I suppose I shall have to begin. Here am I installed here, for the next six weeks, eating and drinking at Mrs. Winton's expense. You've got a sort of *flair*, Oliver, and I want to know what you make of it. Don't you think it's odd?"

"Yes, marvellously odd," said Oliver.

"Then why haven't you asked me anything?"

"Because it's your business and not mine. If you want to tell me anything, you will; if you don't, I prefer not to be told that it's your business."

"Well, now I've begun, so you can speak. Mrs. Winton asked me to come and live here in her absence, and drink her wine and burn her coals. So I did. What do you say to it?"

"That I would much sooner you came and lived with me."

Rex's magisterial, cross-questioning manner left him for a moment. He laid his hand on Oliver's shoulders.

"I can't do that," he said. "It isn't because I'm less fond of you, but because I don't want to be less fond of you. It's the black heart again, with the smallest speck of white in it."

"Well, if you won't, you won't. But failing that, I wish you would go back to Brompton Square. You want entire independence, but you're not getting it here. Whether you pay for it or not now, the bill's running up against you."

"What bill? Bill for food and drink?"

Oliver frowned and shifted his seat.

"No," he said. "The bill I mean is the interpretation that people will put on your being here. Perhaps you've reckoned with that; perhaps you've paid it."

"I see what you mean, I believe," said Rex, "but let's have it in words."

"People will say that you live not only upon her, but with her. Good Lord, a young man doesn't go and live in a woman's flat unless she's in love with him. It doesn't happen, that's all."

"But she's not in love with me," said Rex.

"If you say so, I suppose it is so. But people won't believe it. How on earth can they? Ask anybody. Have you told your mother, for instance, about it?"

"No."

Oliver's smooth face looked extremely sagacious.

"You always tell me I've a woman's mind," he said, "but I'm not so feminine as to ask why. You know perfectly well what she would have thought about it."

"I don't know why I should care what anyone thinks about it," said Rex.

"You wouldn't if you were consistent. But luckily you're inconsistent, and you do care what people who are fond of you think."

Rex chewed the cud of this information for a moment. Apparently he found it rather bitter, for he spoke with annoyance.

"But what business would it be except Mrs. Winton's and mine," he said, "if she was in love with me, or I with her?"

"Nobody's of course. It'll happen some time. I mean some woman will make you fall in love with her.

And then if you're poor and she's rich, it will be perfectly natural that she should do the paying. Once upon a time that was thought ugly, derogatory to the dignity of man and all the rest of that bunkum, but now it's different. Women claim all the rights of both sexes now, and even insist on paying for their man's devotion. Quite right too. Of all exploded conventionalities, that of the dignity of man is the most completely shattered."

Rex swung up and down the room with long, irritated steps.

"Oh, let's keep to the point," he said. "The point is that out of simple kindness Mrs. Winton's let me keep her home fires burning. If people put another interpretation on it, that's the fault of their nasty minds."

"Then were you afraid your mother had a nasty mind that you didn't tell her?" asked Oliver. "Has she got a nasty mind?"

Rex grinned. He never resented a direct stroke like that.

"All right, you scored there," he said. "But I'm going to score in a moment. You dislike my being here, and why's that? You're not old-fashioned enough to care for the interpretation which you say people will put on my being here."

Oliver sat up in his chair.

"Of course I'm not," he said, "but that isn't the point. If two people love each other, how can it matter what they do? They can eat each other up like cannibals if they like; they can do what they choose, for it's all sanctified. But to live on somebody you don't care about is what beats me. And the odd fact is that it's exactly that which stern moralists would find perfectly innocent and proper, greedy but proper. But—oh,

Lord, can't you get the faintest inkling of the whole hang of the thing, Rex? "

Rex tossed back his hair, and out went that determined chin.

"You're being Victorian," he said. "The root of the matter is that you're jealous. That's so Victorian. You don't want me to be friends with Mrs. Winton. But then again that's not the point. If she was here and asked me to stay with her for six weeks, I shouldn't dream of doing so. I just take what she so kindly gives me."

"And that's what damns you," said Oliver.

Rex's mouth tightened itself.

"Explain that," he said.

"I've already done so. You prefer making yourself comfortable at the expense of someone who, you say, means nothing to you, to the responsibility of friendship. You don't even contemplate being devoted to her. You wouldn't conceivably marry her, even if, as you deny, she was in love with you."

"And why shouldn't I? " asked Rex.

"Because you couldn't marry anybody. And——" Oliver paused a moment.

"And you don't want to love," he said. "You want to be quite independent. You want to take without the responsibility of receiving."

Rex remained motionless, leaning his arm on the mantelpiece. Like his father, he was as ruthless to himself as to others: he never craved for mercy, and never granted it.

"That's quite true," he said. "I'm like that all through. I thought you knew that already. You ought to."

Oliver took only a moment to grasp what this implied. Then he got up.

"I think I'll be going," he said. "Ring up if you want to see me, Rex."

He paused at the door.

"I'm always ready," he said. "But unless you say you want me, I shan't come. But I'm always ready."

Rex did not move from the fireplace.

"Right," he said.

Oliver let himself out and went slowly down the stairs. He knew that though they had been talking of Rex's relations (or rather want of relations) with Mrs. Winton, they had under cover of that been talking of their own to each other. Ever since the birth of their intimate friendship, formed at school and continuing through their three years at Cambridge, they had really stood in no different relation to each other than they stood at this moment; Oliver had always given, Rex had always taken. But the one, as they both knew now, had given out of the self-surrender of affection, the other had taken out of the satisfaction of self. Rex had received the symbols and tokens not as symbols but as definite desirable acquisitions. . . . The disclosure, now wholly revealed, had been adumbrated before, both when in the summer Rex had said he would not live indefinitely with his friend for fear of spoiling their friendship, and when he had taken the practical step of leaving the house in Pont Street for the less comfortable independence of his slightly squalid lodgings in Brompton Square. But Oliver had never allowed himself to look these hints and warnings quite fairly in the face: it would have been, he thought then, an act of disloyalty to do so, and he had told himself that 'Rex

was "a bit fed up with him"' or that 'Rex was so keen on his play that he couldn't be bothered with anything else.' But now the situation was too manifest for concealment; though on a different subject Rex had admitted that he took without the responsibility of receiving, and Oliver felt sure that he as well as himself was aware that they were talking not of others but of themselves.

He was conscious of no bitterness whatever towards his friend, nor yet of any change in his own feelings. Rex was no more to blame than he. That was his plane: he could not help being there, any more than Oliver could help being so incomparably far off in the workings of his heart and his emotions. . . . And this had all happened so quietly, as they sat with cigarettes and after-dinner talk, stripping themselves bare, until they came at length to the essential image of themselves, plain now without the paddings and vesture of diversion and pursuits and physical and mental appreciations.

Chapter VII

ALMOST every day there came for Rex, forwarded from his abandoned lodgings in Brompton Square, some short note from his mother. He had left her with the impression (his sympathy with her, at any rate, had made her form it for herself) that he wanted to know, as often as she could send him a line, how his father went on. During the next week there had been no very noticeable change in his condition, but he had spoken once of his own initiative about consulting a colleague. But nothing had come of it, and when one day she asked him whether he would not go to London and do so, he said, with an angry explosion, that it was quite unneces-

sary. The next day Rex received a note saying that his father had passed a bad day, intervals of drowsiness alternating with savage pain.

Rex had had a solitary but very busy and delightful week. He had made no sign to Oliver, for every morning he expected, in spite of Oliver's declaration, that he would hear from him. He thought that he could accurately gauge Oliver's devotion to him, that Oliver could not for the sake of a mere verbal consistency keep away from him, and some day soon he would doubtless come round here and either disregard their temporary estrangement or somehow ingeniously account for it. He was sure that Oliver was having a wretched time without him, and, for himself, he was frankly surprised how much he missed his friend. But it was better that the first advance towards renewals should come from the other side, and in the interval, when his own dull day's work was over, he was excitedly and tremendously busy over this second play which prospered and promised well. But when he was tired with work, it would have been jolly to have had Oliver to talk to for half an hour before bedtime. Once he had even gone to the telephone and rung him up, but before the call was answered, his stubborn independence had asserted itself, and he had clicked the receiver back into its place. He had also sent a one-lined note to him saying "Aren't you being rather a fool?" but this had remained unanswered.

It was Saturday morning again, with no dreary routine at the solicitor's office to occupy the day, and Rex hurried over his breakfast to get back to his beloved work. There were a couple of law-cases which he had to study before Monday morning, but he could do that after this

fever of his own business had abated. With any flow of inspiration, he thought he would be able to finish the first draft of the play before night, if he shut himself up in this comfortable sanctuary where no interruption came, for the last few days had been gloriously fruitful, and night after night he had worked on into the small hours without any thought of diverting himself otherwise than by the diversions which his own weaving brain supplied him with. So by half-past nine he was settled at the table in his writing-room with cigarettes handy and his sheets spread, hugging himself at the thought of the many undisturbed hours which lay in front of him. To-night, perhaps, if all had gone well in the interval, he would amuse himself. He might go to a theatre; possibly, in spite of his stiff-neckedness, he would get hold of Oliver. Really Oliver had been wonderfully obstinate and peevish. . . .

He soon got completely absorbed in the work which, as if from outside himself, charmed and enchanted him. He knew in himself how greatly his power of dramatic presentation had improved with study and practice; only lately he had read over his first play, which had lain on his shelves since its second refusal, and had wondered and groaned at the clumsy technique. Now he was a far better master of his material, and could give it the deft handling which he believed it deserved. It was cruel and cynical enough, there were two malformed or animal souls with whom he mainly dealt, who made an ugly situation for themselves, and could bitterly laugh as they fashioned their Inferno. There were difficulties in the way, no doubt, but difficulties of the sort that had begun to delight him: thin ice to be skated over, innuendoes hardly stated, but to

be indicated in such fashion that the audience could not fail to make them for themselves.

The clock on his mantelpiece had three times told the hour before he emerged at all to the surface consciousness of life and saw on the ash-tray beside him a pyramid of cigarette ends. So complete had been his absorption that if, until the moment his eye fell on them, he had been asked if he had smoked at all, he would probably have said that he was not aware he had done so. It was almost incredible that he was responsible for that holocaust, or that, since he sat here, ten, eleven and twelve o'clock had sounded.

Rex got up and stretched himself long and luxuriously, hearing his firm shoulder-joints crack. There was just one short speech more that lay ready and simmering in his brain, which would place him on the plateau towards which he had been climbing, and when that was done he would have time before lunch to read through and correct what he had written yesterday and this morning. But he felt rather fatigued with this long concentration, and before beginning this final speech, he rang the bell, and asked the servant to bring him a small whisky and soda. He had meant only to be supplied with a glass, but the man brought him in a decanter and syphon as well. Rex took his drink, and felt the stimulant invade and prick his brain into freshness. A couple of mouthfuls was enough, and he took up his pen again. There they were, the two of them who seemed to have created themselves, and he only to have noted and delineated them, waiting for his record of their scene. He wrote without pause: the man speaking. . . .

"Well, I've learned one thing, and that is never to ask a woman to forgive you. She can't do it simply

and directly: it's not in her. Your request opens the flood-gates of her terrible memory, and she overwhelms you with a flood of reproaches. She brings up against you all you have ever done, and not content with that she invents a hundred things you never did. That's the preliminary to her forgiveness. By the time she gets to it, you are so sick and tired of her and everything concerning her, that you don't care two straws whether she forgives you or not. Then she bursts into tears and says you never trusted her, or believed in her love, of which she has just given you so fine a specimen."

Rex found himself frowning and laying down his pen, without knowing why. A second afterwards he knew: there was somebody ringing at the door of the flat, just outside the room where he wrote. He got up quickly to intercept the servant, and tell him to say that he did not want to be disturbed. But it was too late; just as he opened the door of his writing-room, the bell was answered, and standing on the threshold was his father.

"Now we're in for it," thought Rex, and his heart hardened. He advanced a step.

"Hullo, father," he said, holding out his hand.

Mr. Goodwin looked at him a moment without speaking, and without taking any notice of his hand. There was high colour in his face, and he stood erect and dominant.

"I'll just have a word with you, Rex," he said, and put down his hat and umbrella.

Rex squared and stiffened.

"By all means," he said. "I didn't know you were coming up to town. Won't you stay and have some lunch with me?"

Mr. Goodwin made no reply, but walked straight into the room where Rex had been writing. The atmosphere

was sour with smoke, and on the table stood the half-drunk glass with the decanter. Rex closed the door behind him.

"Your mother wrote to you yesterday to say that I should come to see you at the lodgings we believed you occupied, between twelve and one," he said. "I did so. I was informed that you had given them up for the present, and that letters were forwarded to you at this address."

"That is so," said Rex.

Mr. Goodwin's eye, which had already taken in the table and its contents, moved round the room. There were fine prints on the walls, Chippendale furniture of the Chinese taste, and a couple of Persian rugs on the floor.

"You have a nice room here, Rex," he said, speaking very quietly, "and evidently an excellent manservant. Perhaps you would show me the rest of your little lodging."

Rex was as quiet as his father. A request had been made: he would comply with it.

"By all means," he said. "Shall I lead the way?"

They went first to the drawing-room. A no less excellent housemaid had done her morning's work there; the flowers, fresh yesterday, glowed in the vases, Oriental china glowed on the chimney-piece, sofas and chairs, disposed as a woman would dispose them, invited ease. In the dining-room the table was already laid for lunch, and twinkled with silver and fine napery; a bottle of Burgundy and one of hock stood on the sideboard.

"And my bedroom is here," said Rex, throwing open another door, "with the bathroom adjoining. Perhaps you would not care to see that. The kitchen and servants' quarters are down that passage behind the baize door."

Mr. Goodwin had spoken no word during this tour, and once more they came back to the writing-room.

"And now you will kindly tell me what all this means?" he said.

"The flat has been lent me by a friend," said Rex.

Behind the black sternness of Mr. Goodwin's eyes, hope gleamed for a moment.

"Ah, that friend of yours, perhaps," he said, "who stayed with us in the summer. Barnard, Oliver Barnard, wasn't it? I believe you stayed with him when you first came up to town."

"No, it's not Oliver's flat," said Rex.

Mr. Goodwin sat down in the chair in which Rex had been working. The sheets of writing were spread out before him, and he leaned forward looking at them. Rex took a step to the table and closed the leaves of the blotting-book on them.

"Excuse me, father," he said, "those are private papers of mine."

Mr. Goodwin moistened his lips.

"You did not inform me that you had left your lodgings," he said. "Does your mother know of your being here?"

"No, I haven't told her," said Rex.

"Why not?"

"I did not choose to," said Rex.

"I can guess why. You may be sure that I shall. Now to whom does this flat belong?"

"I have told you already. It belongs to a friend of mine. She is not here, by the way."

"She? A woman?"

Rex had not meant to say that. But it mattered very little. To begin with, the insignia of a woman's ownership were too evident to admit of any doubt.

"Yes, a woman," he said.

"Who is she?" asked Mr. Goodwin.

Rex's control over his temper was begining to give way. It was obvious what insinuation lay behind this peremptory catechism. He determined to answer his father's questions without reserve or concealment. It was his fault for asking them.

"Her name is Mrs. Winton," he said. "At least that is the name she is known by. Winton as a matter of fact is her maiden name. She was Miss Winton, Miss Dora Winton. She married Charles Roley, the theatrical manager, and divorced him. She then took back her maiden name with the prefix of marriage."

"And this divorced woman——" began his father.

"No she is not a divorced woman. She divorced him."

"You live with her then?" asked Mr. Goodwin.

"No, I do not in any sense of the word. She lent me her flat during her absence abroad. When she returns I shall go back either to my old lodgings, or, if I can, find others at the price which I can afford to pay, which I hope will be not quite so squalid."

"And meantime you live here. Does the price you can afford to pay include the wages of the servants?"

"Certainly not. That would be hopelessly outside my compass. Three hundred a year does not leave much margin for the comforts of life."

"And who pays your living expenses here?" asked Mr. Goodwin. "Food, drink,"—he pointed at the decanter —"coals, light and so forth?"

"She does," said Rex. "I have no expense of any sort. Beyond washing," he added.

Mr. Goodwin's anger suddenly flared up.

"Good God!" he said. "This woman keeps you

then. If what you say is true—I don't say that I believe it—and you don't live with her, you live upon her. I'm not sure that's not worse. The other's human anyhow, instead of being parasitic."

"So that's that," said Rex.

He walked to the table again and took up his glass. "I'll finish my drink," he said.

His intention was perfectly clear to himself, and he had not miscalculated it. He wanted to exasperate his father beyond the bounds of self-control, and make him realize his unbridled hostility to himself. He admirably succeeded.

"So this is the way you spend your life," said Mr. Goodwin, "living at the expense of a woman, and drinking and smoking your mornings away. You're wasting your life in debauched idleness. You're a parasite; you're no son of mine."

"That's a relief to us both," said Rex.

There was never a more evil word spoken, nor one so little regretted. That fierce anger, detested but despised by him, flared higher yet. And then, even as he watched his father's face, and saw rage, impotent to express itself, twitch the trembling lips, a sudden change came over it. The high colour faded, and it grew ashen white with pain. From behind the glare of those blazing eyes, there looked forth appeal.

Instantly Rex responded to it. Up till that moment the antagonism between them had made him blind to all else: the illness, whatever it was, from which his father was suffering had not so much as occurred to him. But at that look of appeal and of fierce suffering, he became, in spite of the protesting wrath in his soul, as tender and solicitous as he would have been with his mother.

"Father, we're talking wildly," he said. "I'm being a brute, as usual. Now sit quiet, lie down on the sofa. Tell me what I can do."

Mr. Goodwin held on to the arms of his chair, gasping for breath, his face white and wet. "Is he going to die?" thought Rex to himself. His father nodded towards the decanter, and Rex poured out into the glass he had just emptied a dose of neat spirits. He gave it to him, holding it to his lips, and as the spasm passed, he saw the appeal die out of his eyes, and the implacable animosity resume itself. On his side also the pity passed.

"It's nothing; it's over," said Mr. Goodwin at length. "I have had such attacks before: I came up, at your mother's wish, to consult a doctor about them. Let us get back to what we were saying."

He sat still a moment more, then spoke in his natural voice again.

"I do not notice your jibes," he said, "nor indeed do I wish to have any further discussion. I understand the situation perfectly well and what I say to you now requires no answer. I order you to leave this house to-day, and go back to the lodgings you occupied before, which I understand are still vacant. You will also give me the address of this—this woman who is the owner here, and I will write to her saying that it is by my wish that you have gone."

"I have no intention of doing anything of the sort," said Rex.

"Then you will find that your next quarter's allowance will not be paid into your account," said his father.

"That makes it imperative for me to stop here."

"You may reconsider your decision," said his father.

"I warn you that there will be further consequences, if you do not."

"That is at your pleasure," said Rex.

His father got up. He said no further word of any kind, but went straight to the door. He closed it, and presently Rex heard the outer door of the flat shut behind him.

Rex stood there a moment, intently thinking, and every thought that presented itself was one of self-justification. He told himself that he would have listened to reason, weighed it, and reasonably considered it. But no such opportunity had been offered him: he had had threats direct and indirect levelled at him, and had defied. Threats had no logic about them: you had to knuckle under or stand your ground. Discussion had been pronounced to be useless, and he accepted the pronouncement which had been dictated. He had had one human genuine impulse of pity, but his father did not want pity.

All this he pondered: at the end he opened his blotting-book again which contained the page on which he had been writing when his father came in. He read it through, letting his lips frame the syllables.

"So fine a specimen," he said aloud to himself, as he came to the end. . . . Just there had he got, and somewhere in his brain, easily recoverable, if he let himself slip back into the mood in which that speech had taken form, lay the continuation of the scene.

To recapture that was the immediate task, but he paused a moment, unable quite to detach his mind from what had just occurred, and the sight of his father's face, white and wet with anguish, swam in front of him.

"Poor old chap," he thought. "Something devilish wrong." His fingers twitched, and his hand slid forward again over the paper.

Mr. Goodwin's doctor, an old friend of his, lived in Grosvenor Street, and as the hour of his appointment with him was but twenty minutes ahead, he began to walk there, with the intention of sitting quietly in the waiting-room till Dr. Glazier was disengaged. But after this attack and the agitation which had caused it, he found that walking was impossible ; his feet were heavy and the exertion of a dozen steps caused the warning symptoms which he knew it was dangerous to disregard. He passionately rebelled against this physical infirmity ; it was degrading to be so mechanically powerless, while all the time he was conscious of a will and a driving force as vigorous as ever. But there was this interview ahead of him, and after that he must draw out and get signed the short document which he was determined to execute, and then he must go through the four hours' train journey home, and the half-hour's drive that followed. There was enough here to tax the mechanism : it was insane to put on it any strain that could be avoided.

He leant against the railings of a house a few doors away from that mansion of luxurious flats out of which he had just come, hailed a passing taxicab, and presently was in the quiet waiting-room with its solid furniture and obsolete magazines, and its air of a dock, where the criminal, whose offence was that he had lived, was to be condemned on that capital charge. He did not fear the coming verdict in the least, for no disclosure could be worse than that which he had already diagnosed for himself, and with his mind completely detached from it,

he thought over what had happened, and the step he contemplated. He was no longer angry with Rex; that flare of passion seemed to have consumed all the material on which anger feeds, but he was utterly without pity, or desire to reason or conciliate, intent only on crushing Rex's opposition to his will. Not a penny more in the way of allowance should he give him, and not an hour should pass before he had made such alteration in his will as would, in case of his death, leave Rex as dependent as before. And yet he was aware of the futility of it: Rex's stubbornness would never yield to that. The only telling thrust he could make was not a material one, and this was to inform his wife in what concealed circumstances he had found Rex to be living, and let her know what steps he had taken to reduce him to reason. It would make her miserable, but that could not be helped: it was right that Rex's mother should know, and above all, he was vulnerable at just that point. It would then be her task to use the weapons of affection and love which were absent from his own armoury, and if she succeeded in reducing Rex to the decency of submission, so much the better. He would then consider (this must depend on Rex's attitude) whether he would personally forgive him for his defiance and his abominable mode of life. Of course this woman was in love with him, and with feminine cunning was getting him into her toils. He felt he knew all about her; she had stamped herself by what she had already done with the mark of her type. . . .

The wheel of his thoughts paused a moment, and in that second of immobility the question of his motive in making these arrangements presented itself. Were these drastic measures wholly inspired by the desire to

make Rex a more self-respecting man, or was there mixed with that some force that sprang from sheer dislike? Was he revenging himself on an enemy, or rescuing a son? He hastily turned away from the disquieting interrogation. The motive was of no consequence, provided only that he was certain that he was doing what was right in the matter of his paternal responsibility, and of that there could be no doubt.

The door whispered over the thick carpet, and he was shown into his friend's consulting-room. He saw Dr. Glazier's eyes gravely and acutely scrutinizing him before his smile of welcome accompanied his outstretched hand.

"Glad to see you, my dear Goodwin," he said. "Up from Norfolk this morning? Sit down."

It was half an hour later that the street door closed behind him. He had heard nothing that he had not already more than conjectured, but he was sensible of having received a tremendous shock. He knew before he had gone into the consulting-room that his life hung suspended on a single strand, which any physical exertion or fatigue, no less than any agitation of mind, might instantly cause to snap, and which in any case could not be long preserved. Dr. Glazier had recommended him to drive straight into some nursing home in London, and have a few weeks absolute quiet in bed; if he would not do that, he would be wise to put off his return home till to-morrow at any rate, and not run the risk of the fatigue of the double journey to-day. Both these propositions he had declined to accept: he could not endure the thought of being here in proximity to Rex, or of failing even for a day to carry through the programme he had set himself. He had promised, however, to avoid

all preventable exertion, and to go to bed at once on his return home. The life of an invalid for the present was the only chance of its prolongation. This he had guessed already, but he had not adjusted his mind to it or realized it till it was presented to him from outside.

He drove from the doctor's door to his club in Piccadilly. The day was soft, a little mist which had hung over the town in the earlier hours had cleared off, and the pale January sun was as warm as on some noonday of spring. In gutters and about the eaves of the houses the sparrows with optimistic interpretation of the mellow air were busy with wisps of the roadway, as if the time of building and mating was here, and at a street corner there were flower-sellers with daffodils and narcissus to prove that spring was coming up from the south. A warm wind sauntered in through the open window; along the pavements passed coatless strollers, and across the grey grass of the Park bowled the shadows of white clouds across the spaces of sunlight. But all these tokens of the renewed life in the opening year reached him as if through some screen of glass; he had no part in them, and they were but a pageant that moved on the far side of the hard transparent screen of the news which had just been conveyed to him. They all belonged to those who were concerned with life and its promises and expectations, not to him who sat behind this interposed shutter. But close beside him, claiming his immediate attention, was his determination as regards Rex. His wishes and his authority had been derided and defied, and what chiefly at the moment he was anxious for, was without delay to frame his answer.

It took only a few moments when he had arrived at

his club to execute that business. A few sentences in which he revoked his previous will, and left everything of which he was possessed unconditionally to his wife, whom he appointed sole executrix, were enough, and after a little thought he added one more sentence: 'I take this step in order to mark my sense of my son's defiance of my wishes.' He then obtained the witnessing signatures of two friends, and despatched the document to his lawyer's. A further note to his bankers, revoking the order for quarterly payments of £75 to Rex's account, completed the affair.

Soon it was time to start for the station and catch the train that ran on 'Saturdays only.' The existence of that 'Saturdays only' train had been another black mark against Rex, who a fortnight ago had on this day put off his return to Norfolk until Monday, because the fog had prevented him. Rex had let slip the fact that the fog had cleared towards midday, so that he could have come down later, if he had wished. It was just one of a million instances of his habitual duplicity, and as Mr. Goodwin drove to the station, the remembrance of it was sufficient to set simmering again his rancour against him. From the time when he had left him this morning that had been in abeyance, not active at least, but fixed and static; now it was making itself felt again. He had already determined that his duty as husband and father called on him to tell his wife what his interview with Rex had disclosed, and that duty was sweetened by revenge, as if by some self-developing by-product. Now the by-product became the dominant factor; it was in order to slash at the golden cord which existed between his wife and his son, that he contemplated telling her. That she ought

to know about Rex's parasitism was still his cloke, but below it there now stirred the sweet sense of an embitterment between the two. It pleased him to think that he could demonstrate Rex's worthlessness.

The train slid swiftly northwards, and he looked from the window on familiar and fugitive aspects. At Hitchin a line branched to Cambridge, and a coach or two was detached. He felt as if Rex was in those carriages which were left behind, going back to Cambridge and his rather idle, rather expensive life there. Soon afterwards his train passed the golf-links at Knebworth, where on this Saturday afternoon the course was populous with matches, and it seemed to him that Rex was among those couples. Then the train slid into Peterborough, with the grave cathedral standing solidly sentinel above the house-roofs, and once more Rex was with him, as on a day when he was going back to school, and his father had come with him thus far, starting from home in the morning so that they should have a couple of hours together among those glories of Norman architecture. That had not been a very conspicuous pleasure : Rex had clearly wanted to spend the morning on the beach, and leave by the afternoon train, and the interest he evinced in dog-tooth ornament and round arches was of the smallest. Then came King's Lynn, where another futile architectural day had been passed with him. Memories of Rex, all bitter, all tinged with censure and disapproval. . . .

For one moment a yearning after the boy possessed Mr. Goodwin ; he was his son, and the sense of fatherhood, long overlaid with personal dislike, stirred in him. Then over that gleam of sunlight there rushed up the expunging clouds, dark and dripping. Never had Rex

evinced the answering light, he had always been black and insurgent, impossible of access, resentful of intrusion. Anger gathered again in his father's heart, and the justice of his own reprisals. But it would not do to think of it, for it agitated and excited him. There would have to be a cold statement of the case against Rex when he got home, and he knew it by heart already. He would repeat it to his wife quite without emotion.

As the train drew near to Holt, the mellow warmth of the day was dispersed by a keener air that he greedily drank in. There was strength and invigoration in it, and that deadly sense of being sundered from the living world was dispersed by it. He realized with some cool acceptance of his brain the sentence that had been passed on him ; the shock of it was over, and with the shock the stun of it. It suddenly changed from being unrealizable into being familiar ; he was soon going to die, and leave both perplexities and pleasures behind him, as he moved off either into conditions new and unconjecturable, or into nothingness. He had no fear of death, but now he wondered whether his belief in his essential survival of the extinguishing moment was a mere attribute of the vigour and vitality to which annihilation seemed an impossible end, or whether his belief was the result of true conviction. If at any moment during the years of his manhood his Christian faith had been challenged, he would have unhesitatingly affirmed it, but now when the dark door of death was turning on its silent hinges, it was as if a sudden draught had blown in upon that flame of belief, causing it to waver and flap. . . . Instantly his whole soul rebelled against what he had already accepted. He did not mean to die : he was not

going to die. The mind and the will were paramount over material disabilities. Their strength could and would reinforce a failing and disorganized function. All his life he had brought into subjection his own weaknesses: and it would be strange if his force failed now. This sea-spiced air was effervescent wine to his lungs: he filled them with its vitality. But he would be sensible and tranquil too: in a few hours now he would be in bed in the big airy room which looked over the marshes and the far tumbled sand-dunes of the shore, and with windows wide would restore himself with the healings of rest and sea-blown sleep. Thus, utterly quiescent, he would allow himself no exertions or agitations: he would have just one talk with Margaret, stating to her, quite detachedly, without anger or personal feeling, but as if it was casual news from some remote corner of the earth, what Rex had done, and what his rejoinder had been. Remote indeed seemed to him now that interview with its threats and defiances, and remote that other interview in the doctor's consulting-room. Both wore a dream-like unreality: they were immensely far away like the clouds on the horizon beyond the thin blue line of the sea. And yet even as he assured himself of that, there flickered from them some blink of lightning, showing that things violent and tempestuous brewed there.

Margaret had heard the wheels of his vehicle and was standing in the porch when it drove up, and though with his will he had thrown aside his arms and stilled the clash of conflict, he was bleeding, to her eyes, with the wounds of it, and the shadow of death was on his face. She gave one startled irrepressible exclamation at that first glimpse, and then completely mastered herself

again. With the divination of her devotion she guessed there was something more than bad news of himself.

"Ah, there you are, dear," she said. "I heard your wheels."

He had seen that spasm of anxiety in her eyes, and it angered him. It affirmed all that he had been denying. He controlled his resentment by a manner more dry and normal than usual and with just a nod to her, walked past her into the house.

"Tea ready?" he asked, taking off his coat. "I should like tea at once."

"Yes, it's waiting," said she. "I made it a few minutes ago to be ready for you."

"Let us have it then," he said.

She did not want to question him. He would tell her when and how he chose, and to be questioned would only worry him. She had no hope that his doctor had given him any encouraging news: if that had been the case, he must surely, knowing the yearning of her anxiety, have told her at once, and in his drawn gaunt face there was no glimmer of brightness. So, for a while, keeping the same strong control on herself, she asked him a trivial question or two of his journey, gave him the corresponding trivialities of her day, and enquired how Rex was. Looking at him then she saw in his face that which told her what the other bad news was, which was unconcerned with his health.

"Rex looked very prosperous," he said. "Another cup of tea, please."

He drank it in silence, looking out on to the lawn, where in the flower-beds a few faint snowdrops had won their way through the cold earth with the message of spring. His ruthlessness to others as well as himself

blinded him to the quality of the agonized suspense that his silence imposed on her. The burden of what had to be borne was his and his conception of her share in it was limited by his own inflexible hardness : he could not realize that another (and one who as yet knew nothing about Rex) could, by force of sympathy, be suffering far more than he. Indeed, he almost felt that so long as he did not speak, he was sparing her. . . . At length he put down his cup, and faced her. He was feeling tired beyond all power of description. A mountain of solid fatigue lay on him, getting immeasurably heavier every moment. He must get this interview over, and then go upstairs and rest for days and weeks and months. He yearned just to lie flat with closed eyes and turn off all thought from his brain.

"I will tell you about myself first," he said. "I went to see Glazier, who thoroughly examined me. He told me nothing but what I already knew. I needn't give you any details or long names, but I am up against it."

She had laid her hand on his, and his loneliness sought her devotion, for though his next words repudiated his action, he caught her hand in both of his and made a home for it there.

"I want no pity," he said. "I'm not going to give in : I'm going to live a while yet, but for that I must have absolute rest. You mustn't be anxious, Margaret, you must be quite firm and feelingless. My health is in as dangerous a condition as it possibly can be, and nothing but complete quiet can make me go on living. In a few minutes now I shall go to bed and remain there perhaps for weeks. Fatigue or worry may bring on another attack, and I can't afford other attacks."

He paused a moment.

"There's one other thing," he said, "and then I shall have told you all about myself. Since I've been face to face with it, I've had moments of looking into utter blackness and nothingness. I've been hard and self-sufficient, and I am so now. You believe in a future life, in our redemption and ultimate salvation, don't you?"

The love that smouldered in her eyes, blazed out.

"My dear, I believe in it and I know it as I know nothing else in the world," she said. "Even you and Rex are less real to me than that."

He nodded.

"Pray for me," he said suddenly.

"My life is a prayer for you," she said.

He still held her hand closely, and in the silence of her encompassing devotion his resolve to tell her about Rex wavered. But then, as from some hell of good intentions, a notion of duty, of the rightness that Rex's mother should know invaded him. It represented itself to his mind as duty, but it was winged with bitterness against Rex and some Mosaic sternness that justified justice.

"I have one more thing to tell you," he said. "It needs discussion as little as the other."

"About Rex," she said. "Tell me at once. What is it?"

Their hands slipped apart: it was as if Rex had sundered them.

"I went to Rex's rooms," he said, "and found that he had not been there, except to move his belongings, since he left us a week ago."

Like a wave rising up in the midst of a calm sea, the thought of Rex and the scathing words of this morning began to gather in foam. A suspicion also as to the

truth of Rex's assertion of her ignorance of his movements shot into his mind.

"Did you know that?" he asked sharply.

"You know I didn't," she said without hint of reproach.

"I take your word for it," he said. "Rex is living at this moment and has been for the last week at a flat belonging to a woman called Mrs. Winton. She is the divorced wife—no, that is not fair—she divorced her husband who is a theatrical manager. She is away abroad, but he lives in luxury there, and she pays every atom of the expense, food, drink, servants. He is kept by her in fact. You know what that means. Without doubt she is his mistress."

"Did you ask him that?" she said.

"Yes. Naturally he denied it. Quite as naturally I didn't believe it."

"But supposing it is true?"

That wave of anger and dislike was beginning to tower, as if raised by some seismic explosion in the sea-bed.

"I am not sure that it isn't as bad or worse if it is true," he said. "She wants him anyhow to fall in love with her, and is feeding him up. Can you imagine anything more degrading for a son of mine?"

"Rex is my son, too," she said. "You are assuming evil about him."

"Assuming?" he said with infinite scorn. "I found him there like a stalled ox, living on her. The room was thick with smoke, there was a decanter of whisky on the table. There he was, spending his morning like that. He received from me a sufficient allowance for a decent industrious life, and all the time he lives on a woman, in adultery or in parasitism. Take your choice."

He had risen to his feet and the colour flamed in his gaunt face. She saw that and a spasm of anxiety for him twisted her very heart-strings. But tearing and dragging her the other way was her mother-love which, whatever Rex had done, must always cling to him, be it who it might that tried to wrench her from him. The sight of her husband's face, the pitiless scorn in his voice terrified her. He must not feel like that. . . .

"Oh, Francis," she said. "My dear, my dear, you mustn't think of Rex like that. It breaks my heart. And you must not let yourself be agitated and angry, not for his sake, but for your own."

He came close to her.

"Have you no desire then to be proud of your son?" he said. "Do you want him to grow up like that? Do you like his gross deception towards yourself and me? Do you like his living on a woman's money? I can tell you that I don't, and I've taken due steps to stop it. Not one penny further allowance does he receive from me as long as he remains in that harlot's house. I've told him that. And what remains for me to tell him, is what I did after I left him. I revoked my will, and at my death not a yard of land, not a brick of this house, not a twopenny-piece of money comes to him. I've no doubt whatever that he wishes me dead, but he won't find himself richer for that. And if I was on my death-bed now, my last words to you would be, that you must look after him, and not condone his living in sloth and sin."

She put out a hand of entreaty. He was working himself up to a pitch of excitement and bitterness of scorn that could not but be very harmful to him, and yet it was not that which brought her pleading pity into

that beseeching gesture of her hand towards him. His body was sick even unto death with physical frailty, but sick even unto death was his soul with hate of the boy she loved, his son and hers.

"Ah, you mustn't for the very love of God, feel like that towards Rex," she said. "You judge him unfairly, you condemn him on surmise and conjecture. As for your depriving him of his allowance, don't you see that you are driving him to all that you desire to save him from?"

"Drive him? Good God!" said he. "He wants no driving! I suppose you would have me double it to reward him for his economy. He's shameful. He's no son of mine. I told him that, and he had a jeer at me for it. I——"

He clutched at his heart in the agony that suddenly tore him, in the rending of soul and body asunder. He sank on to his knees, clutching her with one hand, and bearing her down with him. Her arms were round him now, and with his head lying on the tenderness of her bosom, his eyes from which the fierceness was quelled by the stroke of death, sought hers. His lips quivered into a smile, as he saw in the dear face which was already growing dim to him the soul of the girl he had loved and the woman who had given herself to him in utter devotion. . . .

Chapter VIII

REX'S spate of work had flowed boisterously on all afternoon, and now his curtains were drawn and his lamp lit. He was unconscious of the passage of time, each minute might have been an hour, each hour a minute, so long as his brain weaved and created. Not

till it was nearly seven did his pen, pausing a moment after the final word, scrawl a great jubilant dash across the paper. There was the first draft finished, and like a diver in deep seas suddenly releasing himself from the clutch of his pearl-seeking, he rose swift and bubbling to the surface again. Not one stroke of revision or correction would he do that night; violently reacting from his toil, he longed for laughter and diversion. A bath and an early dinner, thought he, and then out to whatever pleasure beckoned. Or should he just sit here alone gloating over accomplishment?

A bath and early dinner anyhow. He felt grimy and smoke-dried; had he really consumed all those cigarettes? He was gloriously hungry also, for there stood his tea cold and crinkled and untouched, and now that he came to think of it he believed he had not lunched either. No, certainly he had not; for shortly after his father had gone the butler had asked him if he was going to lunch at home, and he had said he would not, though assuredly he had not left the house since. As he undressed, he thought over that violent fish-wife interview: it had really been a good thing that his own temper was in control, for with it loose as well as his father's, there might have been some disastrous things said. As it was, there had been pretty heavy weather, and his father, the Boreas of the storm, had tried to crush him into obedience by the withdrawl of his allowance. If there was one thing that beyond all others could make Rex stubborn in his disobedience, it was just this sort of threat, designed to starve him, no less, into submission.

The long hours in that small room with the incense of tobacco continually ascending had made his clothes

reek of stale smoke, and it was pleasant to stand free of them, and flex and stretch his cramped muscles with exercises. Even his hair was tainted with it, and he poured into his bath some yellow essence that stood on a glass shelf, and infused the steam of the bath with a clean odour of cedar-wood. Head under he went, and then lay soaking, fantastically following up the sequel of this starvation treatment. He must earn some money if supplies were cut short: there was the play first of all, and he figured to himself some triumphant first night, and the booking brisk and the cheques fat. It would be a fine gesture then to repay his father the two meagre quarters of his allowance up to date, and, shaking off the dreary dust of the solicitor's office, turn his brains to gold. He wanted money now that there was a good prospect of his presently being without it, and though fine artistic achievement was far dearer, there was no reason why the two should not run in harness. It was like his father, he thought, to attempt to drive him not by convincing wisdom and appeal to reason, but by the brutality of material threatenings. . . . But if the play found no producer, what then? Rex grinned to himself through the steam as he planned to hire a hurdy-gurdy and, dressed in rags and toeless boots, to wander up and down the quay at Roughton with melancholy music. What a pity Oliver was not on hand for discussion and laughter. . . . Or he might advertise in some daily paper that a young gentleman of pleasing appearance and affectionate disposition was willing to do anything in the world in return for board, lodging and suitable pocket-money. He would send the paper marked to his father. . . .

There came a tap at the door, and the butler's voice

announced a telegram. In answer to Rex's invitation he brought it in, with eyes discreetly averted, and Rex's wet fingers tore it open. The fragrant mist of steam made reading difficult, but by standing up in the bath he could decipher it.

"Your father suddenly taken ill," it ran, "come at once. Mother."

Rex's first sensation was one of extreme annoyance. If he had only stopped his work an hour earlier, he would have dined and gone out by this time. But close on the heels of that was the thought of his mother. He guessed already the true significance of the telegram: it was like her to send that first. In another hour, he felt sure, he would receive another. . . . Wet and steaming he got out of his bath, and with a towel round him went out into the hall where there was a Bradshaw. As he expected, there was no means of getting down to Roughton that night: a slow train early on Sunday morning, arriving there at two in the afternoon, was the earliest possibility. He wrote a telegram in reply, announcing his arrival then.

He went back to his bedroom, and dressed quickly. It was utterly impossible to get down there to-night, two hundred miles from London. He would have gone if he could, so he candidly assured himself: as it was, he must wait till to-morrow, and spend the evening here. What was he to do with the hours? Where was the use of dining here alone, and shutting himself up afterwards? His father was very ill: that was all he knew for certain, and it would not make him better if he bored himself. There was no question now of an evening of gloating over his finished work: the news, and in especial the thought of his mother would strike across all meditative

enjoyment. It did no one any good that he should sit and yawn and gnaw his nails. It was far better and more sensible to seek distraction from outside. But if he was right about the real meaning of that telegram, he must be quick. If a second followed while he was still here, he could hardly go out. Though nobody would know, there was yet a secret indecency about that. After all it was his father.

He pictured to himself what his father would do, if similar news had reached him concerning himself, and it was impossible for him to start immediately. Certainly he would eat his dinner, play chess afterwards, or bury himself in his studies, which were his forms of diversion. That was sense, as Rex told himself. He would have dinner at once, and be quick over it. There was a play he very much wanted to see which started at eight. If he hurried, he would not miss much of it, but with luck, he would miss the second telegram if such was on its way. Twenty minutes sufficed for his dinner, during which he listened apprehensively for the tingle of the front-door bell which might imply the arrival of further news, and at the end he hurried downstairs to get away from the house. On the very threshold he passed a telegraph boy coming in. But his orange-coloured envelope might have been for anybody else in the big house of flats, and he quickly hailed a taxicab.

The play instantly absorbed him, for it was a model of flawless carpentry, planed and dovetailed with amazing finish, and though the plot, involving the unexpected return of a devoted husband in the middle of the night, to find a very trying domestic situation, was trivial to the last degree, that mattered little to Rex, for it was the method with which he was concerned. Moreover, two

popular idols of the English stage were engaged on its unravelment, and both had their expected stunts. They were good workmanlike stunts : and it was clear that the chief interest of the audience was in seeing them jump through their hoops, the usual hoops, with grace and finish. That would always be popular : as long as they did what was expected of them, with frailty and sentiment in the one case, and passion striving with principle in the other, they would always command success. To write for the players began to present advantages to his mind : for to construct a play that somebody would act seemed a more promising step towards securing a position as a playwright than to load your shelves with unmarketable masterpieces.

The first two acts passed for him in one spasm of concentrated attention, but with the fall of the curtain the thought of what news to-night might bring, and what manner of return home would be his to-morrow, surged into his mind. He had come out to escape just that, and leaving his seat, he went into the bar for the distraction of any friend or acquaintance, and ran straight into Oliver and the interminable Mr. Fortescue.

Oliver's face lit up with that radiant affection which Rex knew so well. How often it had bored him, for it implied demands, not consciously or purposely, but by its very nature. But just now it seemed altogether lovely to him. Then, before his own smile could answer it, it faded off Oliver's face like a frosty breath.

" Hullo, Rex," he said quietly.

" Not seen you for a long time," said Rex.

That was sufficient conversation from anybody but himself, and Mr. Fortescue broke in, making room for Rex on a big settee, so that he sat between the two boys.

"And how's that?" he said. "I always understood you two were like Damon and Pythias. Goodwin, is it not? Yes, of course, Goodwin. A very remarkable play we are witnessing to-night. There will be great interest in the development. I foresee plainly that we are not to be left with a wrecked home. A wonderful device to introduce the climax of the husband's arrival in the first act. We shall see more, too, of that note which Miss Fairfax left on the table without opening. There was a situation something like that in a play I saw in Paris in the year before the war. Guitry—was it Guitry, now? No matter: the situation was practically the same. Your mother was with me, Oliver: we had dined at the Café Anglais. She would have it that the unopened note had nothing to do with the plot. 'Trust an old playgoer,' I said to her. 'You will find it has everything to do with the plot.' Another play that made a great sensation about the same time was *Le Perron*. Guitry was in that too, but I wonder how that could have been. Mark you, I'm not saying that our plays and our actors are a whit inferior to the French: it just so happens that a couple of French plays occurred to my mind. . . ."

Rex got up and strolled across to the bar, tingling with an intolerable exasperation. He longed to shout out to Mr. Fortescue, "Do hold your tongue, you crashing bore," or something about the significance of which there could be no possible doubt. All his nerves were suddenly on edge: he felt furious with him, furious with Oliver, furious with the telegram he had received. But chiefly it was Oliver . . . all this week Oliver had made no sign to him, and now when he met him, he veiled himself like that. He ordered a whisky,

turning his back on the two, and then shifting a little saw from the tail of his eye that Oliver had got up, and was edging through the crowd towards him. Mr. Fortescue appeared to be continuing talking pompously and judicially to nobody at all.

Rex turned back again, but presently he knew that Oliver was at his elbow.

"Come outside, Rex," he said. "It's hideously hot here, and there's such a squash."

Rex's inclination was to tell him that he was quite comfortable where he was, and bandy elegant trifles with the barmaid. That he felt would annoy Oliver, and he would like to hurt him. It was almost against his will that he found himself saying,

"Right, I'll just pay for my drink," and the two sidled through the crowd, and out through the swing-doors on to the threshold of the theatre. The crowd passing along the pavements a few yards in front of them, and the closed door behind made a privacy, an isolation. And then once again the devil seized Rex.

"Well, what is it?" he said. "Did you want to tell me anything?"

For a moment Oliver's face became a mere mask of perfectly polite indifference. He drew a cigarette case from his pocket.

"Oh no: nothing particular," he said. "It was rather hot in there."

Suddenly he saw the utter mistake and folly of this. There was Rex bristling with some unspoken soreness and irritation and could a friend do nothing better than regard him with icy indifference?

"I don't mean that," he said. "It's extremely particular. I want to ask you if you're never going to

want me again. I'm not meaning to give up the greatest friendship of my life, unless you wish me to."

Something tormented and helpless looked out of Rex's eyes. He felt fast bound in misery and iron, the iron of his own temperament, which sometimes seemed positively to hate love. With a huge effort he threw off those abominable shackles.

"I don't wish you to," he said. "I've given you every reason for supposing I do, but I don't. I've wanted you ever since we met last, and I've been too proud to say so. I shall do it again and again. That's me."

Oliver's tender rather womanish mouth twitched.

"No it isn't," he said. "It's just that which isn't you. As for me, I always want you, Rex."

"Odd way of showing it," he said, "not to come near me for a week. Good Lord, there I go again!"

Oliver laughed outright at this.

"You do indeed," he said. "That was a good one. Now let's drop it. Flourishing?"

"The seven devils are. And there's trouble. My father was up in town this morning, and I had a fearful row with him. He found me in the flat. And I've just had a telegram to say he's terribly ill. My mother sent for me."

He saw the incredulous surprise in Oliver's face.

"No, I'm not quite as bad as that," he said. "I should have gone if it had been possible. But there was no train till to-morrow morning. I shall go home now, I think: I shan't wait for the rest of the play. I expect another telegram, you see. I think the first was meant to break it to me. And the damned thing about it is that I don't care, except as regards my mother."

Oliver's whole conception of affection and comradeship blazed out from his face.

"Oh, Rex, I'm so sorry," he said. "Mayn't I come back with you? There might be something you wanted me to do."

Rex shook his head.

"Thanks awfully," he said, "but I think I'll be alone. You'd better get back to that devastating uncle of yours."

He laid his hand on Oliver's shoulder.

"Good boy!" he said, and went off to the cab-rank opposite.

There was a telegram, as he expected, lying on his table when he got home. Though he felt he knew perfectly well what it contained, he could not bring himself to read it at once, for he dreaded the confirmation of his own indifference. It would be horrible to realize himself standing there and not caring. At last he tore it open and read.

"The end was quite peaceful. Come to me, my own son."

Rex's lip quivered, and in his throat the sobs began to gather. But he wept for the living and not for the dead.

He sat there awhile, intimately sharing in a misery that was not his own, but alien altogether from the cause of it. Not twelve hours ago, his father had been here, and Rex knew how they had hated each other. He did not in the least hate him now, some sponge had passed over that, but if his father was still alive, he knew that they would continue hating each other. As it was, he

wished their relations had been otherwise: he would have liked now to have been fond of him, he would have liked to mourn him. But he couldn't. . . .

The telegram had fluttered to the ground, and Rex, as he picked it up, and read with eyes that again grew dim his mother's message, noticed that it had been re-directed from Brompton Square. He pulled out of his pocket the first telegram he had received, and found that it recorded the same re-direction. It was possible therefore that his father had not carried out his assurance that he would tell her the whole story. As far as Rex knew he might have died without speech with her: in that case she would still be wholly ignorant of the scene that had taken place here. . . .

He became alert at once. If she did not know, there was every reason for not telling her about it. No one else but he and his father knew. To be sure there were his father's threats to consider, the withdrawal of his allowance, and something which he had referred to as being 'other means' of bringing him to reason, but these might well be unaccomplished menaces, designed to be carried out, if the threat did not by itself produce the requisite effect. His mother might be spared the knowledge that within a few hours of his death, his father had been here in the full blast of his contemptuous anger, and that that was the last Rex had seen of him. She had enough to bear without that in this loss which to Rex was meaningless.

His brain had begun to plan and scheme, and though it was late, and he must start very early next morning, he felt no wish for sleep. He could not do more than sketch the contour of his plans for the immediate future, but one thing was clear, namely that he would no longer

drudge away in that dusty office. Whatever his father's disposition of his property had been, Rex supposed that he would have enough to live on, while he devoted himself, no longer drugged and fatigued by a frowsy routine that occupied the working hours of the day, to the passion of his pursuit. An income sufficient for his father and mother to live on in quiet comfort at Roughton with three hundred a year for himself, would be more than enough for the two of them. A premium, he supposed, already paid, would be sacrificed, but this was a ransom rather than a sacrifice. What if, for the present, an indefinite present, he settled down at Roughton? His mother would love to have him there: to her it would seem an act of the most tender and filial affection that he should leave London—Brompton Square and Mount Street—and make himself her companion and comforter. He could envisage himself there, too, utterly content with her and the great wide places he loved and his work pursued in some sort of tranquil fever. And indeed this room which had given him good hours and the flat altogether was now tainted with some uneasy bitterness. It was unwise perhaps to be here at all: both Oliver and his father, poles apart in perception and morality, were extremes which met over that, and the population of the zone which lay between them would probably share their view. He would have to write to Mrs. Winton, easily and creditably explaining his departure. . . .

Rex got up from the chair where he had been sitting, the arms of which his father had gripped during that attack of his that morning, and began walking up and down the room. It would not be a bad thing to write that letter to her now, representing himself, as was

indeed the case, as having just received the news of his father's death, and realizing that he must at once go to his mother, and remain with her as long as she needed him. It was for him (so he began to phrase his letter) a mournful end to his enjoyment of Mrs. Winton's delightful kindness: never had he enjoyed his days more, or worked so hard and happily. Her servants had anticipated his every want: what a household of domestic genius! . . . It was a dreadful break, she would understand, everything had tumbled in ruins about him, and all had to be rebuilt. He made no plan for the future, except to catch the earliest train to-morrow down to Roughton: that for the present comprised his horizon.

Yes, it was much better to write that now, and be able to tell his mother that it was done, if it turned out that she knew of his present quarters. He sat down again, pulled paper and ink to him, and wrote. Every word of what he said was true, and yet every word reeked of insincerity.

It was still early in the afternoon when he drove by the great church on the top of the hill above Roughton, and saw the red-roofed village smouldering below in the pale glow of the January sun, and the leagues of marshes, and the high horizon line of sea beyond them. The tide was full, and the broad estuary, between the sand-dunes of the Point and the nearer shore, a shield of shining water, unruffled by the light breeze that drew landward from the sea. The tranquil sparkling day, the caress of that bracing air, filled him with the thrill of the home which would never again be disturbed by the bickerings and blame and resentments for which,

he acknowledged to himself, he was at least jointly responsible. He had always been on the alert to find hostilities and to provoke them, just as his father had been to criticize and correct. Now all that was over, fit only for burial and oblivion. Regrets were useless, for he knew that if the conditions of those eternal conflicts of will and temperament had been renewed, neither his father nor he would have done any better in the future than they had done in the past. Regrets implied contrition : you could not be contrite over the inevitable and the unavoidable. . . .

She met him at the door : coming out, as she always did, when the noise of his expected wheels reached her. Just as there was none of the conventional parade of mourning in the house, no tiptoe footsteps, and down-drawn blinds to shut out the day and symbolize bereavement, so with her the windows of her soul were wide to the sun and the air of her unshaken faith, and she wholly normal and natural. She had remembered Rex's liking for cockles, and there was a dish of them for his late lunch, and his coming was just as much a human joy to her as ever. As he ate, she sat with him making the coffee for him in the bubbling glass globe, and told him about the end.

" It was yesterday afternoon that he got back," she said, " and when he had had his tea, he told me first what Dr. Glazier had said. He was ordered absolute rest in bed, if his life was to be prolonged, and oh, my dear, I am so deeply thankful he was spared that. He would have hated it so : it would have been intolerable to anyone so full of energy and life, and all the time there would have been no chance of his ever getting

well. He talked about it perfectly calmly: he had absolutely no fear at all. Just one assurance he wanted from me, that there could be no doubt about the salvation and redemption of the world. And he asked me to pray for him. As if I ever ceased from that!"

She looked at him with that wonderful untroubled smile.

"He had no doubts himself, I am sure of that," she said. "It was just that first glimpse of the dark and the loneliness, and the untrodden way which lies in front of us all. And the end came so quickly: I think he had not more than a moment's pain. As he talked he fell on to his knees, and my arm was round him, Rex, and he passed away like that, and, thank God, the last thing he saw before his eyes opened on the everlasting day, was my face close to his. Oh, thank God, it was like that! His head was against my breast, dear,—his soul went forth without struggle or sigh."

Rex suddenly found that the silence he had planned was impossible. He had made up his mind that if his father's death had been like this, he would never let her know about that scene in the flat yesterday morning. But her love for him insisted on the disclosure. Whether it pained her or not, he was compelled to tell her. Not to do so was unthinkable.

He pushed back his plate.

"I've got to tell you something, mother," he said. "I saw my father yesterday morning, and we had a horrible scene, the worst we have ever had, and he left me in bitter anger. It's a miserable story, and if I didn't love you I wouldn't tell you——"

She smiled at him through the tears that now for the first time dimmed her eyes.

"Oh, Rex, how I love you for wanting to tell me," she said. "But you needn't: I know it all. I, too, meant not to tell you, and I was wrong, I think. But I hated the idea of hurting you. I meant you to think he had said nothing of it to me."

"What did he tell you?" he asked.

"He told me that he had looked for you where he thought you were in Brompton Square, and got your address. He was very angry with you, but you know that. He said he had cut off your allowance, and altered his will. . . . But you mustn't allow yourself to think of that scene with him any longer. You were both to blame, I expect, he as much as you. But we can't blame him now: it's all washed out and healed, and so it's only fair that you shouldn't blame yourself. Besides, doesn't he forgive you now for all your share in it, as freely as you forgive him? You may be quite sure of that, my darling."

As their talk went on, the sense of the utter unreality to him of all his mother felt to be more real than the sunshine and the air, grew ever more acute, and he clung with a sort of desperation to that which was real to him, namely his sincere and deep affection for her. Like his equals in age and upbringing, he had been nurtured in a faith that was presented to him at school as a group of facts connected with education, and with about the same emotional appeal as quadratic equations or the configuration of Australia. He had been confirmed, he had had lessons in the Old and New Testaments, and had memorized the kings of Israel and Judah, the miracles of Christ and St. Paul's missionary journeys as knowledge necessary for the successful treatment of examinations, and was perfectly prepared to assert that he

believed in all these pieces of knowledge. At home there had been morning prayers every day, a chapter of the Bible read by his father, followed by a series of supplications, with the cook, housemaid, kitchenmaid and parlourmaid all presenting their backs to the family and looking through their chairs into the garden; and on Sunday the service in the parish church, and the Sacrament, for which after his confirmation, he stayed as a matter of course, once a month. It was assumed that it was all real to him, and now, when he saw in this crisis where faith entered poignantly into the affairs of life, how sublimely real it was to his mother, he discovered, with a sense of estrangement and distance, how enormously little it was to himself. There was she, from whom her husband, the centre of her life and her thought and care, had been whisked away into the unseen and the unmaterial, and he was more really hers to-day in some completeness of purification, and burning away of dross, than he had ever been before. Widowed and bereft, so far from being stricken, even in these first hours of her loss, she neither cowered nor complained, but rose in some radiant transfiguration, to welcome and embrace the event. God had taken, but she gave with the joy of her open hands, so exalted by that sunlight in her soul, that, with Rex's hand in hers, she could not doubt that her belief was his. . . . And it was so easy for him to let her assume that, so brutally impossible to let her have the faintest suspicion that it was not so. All the little tokens and tendernesses that he so sincerely gave her, she incorporated in her own convictions: she could not doubt that they were completely at one. They went together into the chamber of death, and she turned the sheet back off the face,

and gazed at it with a love that had no shadow of resignation in it, but was full-orbed in radiant content.

"How all age and trouble and pain has passed from even that shell and garment of his," she said. "And if death does that to the frail body, my darling, what does it do to the strong soul?"

Rex had never seen death before, and, as she uncovered the face, he shrank back as from some terrible stranger. For that moment it did not resemble his father: it was like the simulacrum of something quite alien. But immediately his father infused it, awfully present and displeased. It was shocking that he should lie as quiet as that who had seethed with energy: there was a sour but satisfied smile on his mouth as if something had been said which slightly offended him, but as if he was superior to such smallness. Then the vitality of its quietness grew stronger: would the eyes presently open and disclose a look of hostility? Would the mouth open, and frame such syllables as 'I thought, Rex, that I told you not to do that' . . .

He felt he knew what his mother expected of him, and with repugnance he leaned over the still, rigid form, and bent his head towards the face. His father seemed to expect it too: he lay there waiting for that final and solemn salutation. But Rex could not bring himself to touch with his lips that white forehead. He shrank even from breathing the air in its proximity, and with held breath he just bent close to it, and withdrew himself again, glad that the feint was over. But the mere effort of the pretence had made him resentful of what was now but a memory. It was all shocking: he hated himself for feeling like that, and with the same repulsion he knelt there by his mother's side, with eyes

closed, as she said a prayer. Then she covered the face again, and clung to him in the strong embrace of her love.

"My darling, what a help and rock you are to me," she said.

Well: that was over, and if he had done his part as regards her, there was the task accomplished, and they went downstairs again together, and into his room, where the microscope still stood in the window, focussed for the inspection of some slide he had put into it, and on the writing-table a pen lying crossways on the open blotting-pad over a sheet of paper on which he had written the date of yesterday.

"I kept it all just as he left it," she said, "for you to see. There's his chair pushed sideways, as he got up to go to catch his train. I had to come in and remind him that he had only just time to get to the station. Do you remember how pleased he was when you used to get up early and work at your law-books in his room before breakfast? He loved your doing that, Rex. He was tremendously pleased about it."

She laughed.

"And you were too dear," she said, "when on one of those mornings, he said he would go out with you and bathe at the Point. You wanted to have a long day alone and a long bathe, and you must have been so sweet about it, for he came back saying what a jolly morning you had had together. And then that nice boy Oliver Barnard came and stayed with us."

She spoke of her husband quite naturally, as still existing. He who was so immensely with her now was the same as he who had been with her in the past. . . . Rex was quick to pick that up.

"Father didn't really like Oliver," he said.

She laughed again.

"I know. Oliver wasn't his sort at all. Your father was so delicious, wasn't he, when he wasn't in line with somebody. He became icily polite and courteous, until he could bear it no more, and then he couldn't help fizzing a little, through the cork he had plugged himself with. He always knew, bless him, how intolerant he was apt to be of views which he couldn't share. That was the penalty of his own strength and vigour."

She closed the blotting-book, kissing the pen as she laid it back in its tray.

"I hope you'll use this room, dear, when you're here," she said. "It's so unnatural to shut up a room and not use it if it has belonged to someone you love. One ought to move about among those dear memories, not cut them off. And there's his microscope. He was working with it all the day before he went up to London. . . . Come out and stroll in the garden, while the sun is still up. Or don't you want to take a good brisk walk after your long hours in the train?"

"I'll do that to-morrow," he said. "I'll stop about with you to-day."

They went out on to the lawn, after she had made him put on a coat to accompany so leisurely a walker as herself, and spoke of the arrangements she proposed for the funeral. He would, of course, be buried here by the family graves in the churchyard, and she thought it had better be as soon as possible.

"I would have it to-day if I could," she said, "but we must give time for anyone to come who wants to attend it. But he had no near relation, and in the retired life that he deliberately chose for himself, he dropped away from old friends. So I think Tuesday. . . . And you, my

dear? You'll be wanting to get back to your work very soon after, and that's quite right. But could you stay till the end of the week? It would be lovely if you could."

Rex took her arm.

"It depends on you, mother," he said. "I'm ready to stop much longer than that on one condition."

"And it depends on me?" she asked.

"Entirely. The condition is your wanting me."

Her face grew bright as with some joy like that of a child over some wonderful and perfect surprise-present that has been given.

"My darling: do you mean you will come and live here with me a little?" she asked.

"That's what I mean. Not leave you till you're tired of me."

She took his hand, held it and kissed it.

"Oh, Rex, I've got no words," she said. "That you've offered to do that is the loveliest and best. . . . I thank you, dear: I bless you for it. But we must consider if you can do it. What about your work? And your friends and all your interests in London, which it is so utterly right for you to have. I don't think you must. But ah, the joy of your suggesting it."

His grey eyes grew tender with an affection utterly sincere and real.

"And haven't I a friend and an interest here?" he asked.

"Oh, Rex, you enchanting boy," she said, using Oliver's word.

"You're the enchanter," he said. "It's your spell. And about my work. I have made up my mind. I can't go back to that solicitor's office. I always hated it: I never felt the least interest in it. My work is to

write plays. I'm going to succeed: I'm going to make myself famous and rich, and then there'll be a home for you in London and one for me here. That's my plan. And I can write so much better here than I can in town. That is, if you want me. But perhaps you don't. If so, say so. Please say so! Don't mind me and my scorned affection."

"Idiot," she said. "Beloved idiot!"

"Well, that's settled. And the contract may be terminated with a week's warning by either party without resentment or recrimination. We'll see who gets tired of the other first."

He saw there was some unasked question in her eyes, and divined what it was.

"About the flat," he said. "Isn't that it? I wrote last night to Mrs. Winton, telling her of my father's death, and saying that I couldn't take advantage of her hospitality any longer, as I was coming down here, and expected to stop here for the present, anyhow. So you see, I was conceited enough to imagine that you would want me."

"You're a mass of vanity," she said. "But as for your giving up Mrs. Winton's flat, I am so glad of that. You mustn't think that I feel about it in the least as your father did. He got it out of focus, out of proportion. . . . But I am glad you have left it. Your father saw so clearly and strongly what other people would think of it. You're a very attractive young man, you know, and living there like that . . ."

She broke off: she trusted Rex absolutely, and to state what other people would think was a disloyalty to her confidence in him. The whole subject of immorality of that sort made for her an atmosphere in which

she stifled. But Rex could not leave it quite like that.

"My father suggested point-blank that she was my mistress," he said.

"Oh, Rex, don't!" said she. "As if I didn't know that couldn't be true. He didn't mean it: he was angry. He said it thoughtlessly. What he didn't like, nor do I for that matter, was the idea of your living at her expense instead of at his. He was always awfully proud about money matters. And he knew people might put a certain interpretation on it. The notion of that was horrible to him. Don't let us speak of it any more."

Here for her was battle joined between the two great loves of her life, and in herself she knew that Rex was victorious. She had to acknowledge that before she left the subject.

"He was utterly wrong in his attitude to you about it," she said. "I told him so. I could not bear his thinking of you as he did. He told me also that he had stopped your allowance, which I said was the most unwise thing he could do, and that he had altered his will. That was an injustice to you, done in anger, and I shan't let you suffer for that. Whatever was his is mine and yours. What exactly he did, I suppose we shall know in a day or two."

But even as she acknowledged that, the strength and tenderness of the other devotion, which was her lifelong habit, asserted itself.

"What he did, he did in anger," she said. "I am sure he would have seen the unfairness of it when he thought it over, and would not have allowed it to stand. Oh, my dear, he sees it now: I am so sure of that. He would wish me to put him right with you."

She paused, still holding his hand, and looking up at him with eyes radiant with the love that is stronger than death. She was on heights that were unattainable to Rex, and those sunlit eminences dazzled him. She believed things which were incredible to him, and things about himself wholly unjustified. But for the moment that did not seem to matter : it was her ability to believe them that was so amazingly beautiful.

He bent down and kissed her.

" I won't be a brute to you," he said.

Chapter IX

REX was sitting one morning, a few weeks later, at the table in his father's room. He had finished revising the play of which he completed the first draft on the day his father died, and this morning the typed copy of it had arrived. It was to be sent to a theatrical manager next day, and this evening, before it went on its quest, he was to read it to his mother. She was looking forward immensely to it ; one act would be read between tea and dinner, the remaining two afterwards. She had been invisible since breakfast finishing some letters and minor businesses, so that she would have the whole evening absolutely free for the unhampered enjoyment of her treat, and he had just run through the text, correcting typographical errors as he went. The re-reading of it swiftly like this with a detached mind had caused it to be borne in upon him, more clearly than ever, that she would radically dislike it.

It still wanted an hour till lunch-time, and he had nothing particular with which to fill it. Outside the chilly rain of February was falling thick, hissing as it

dripped on the shrubs and spreading in pools of water over the path. Through the leafless trees of the garden, he could see that a sea-mist had crept up with the tide, and now covered the marshes, and foghorns were mournfully hooting from somewhere outside the Point. It was a day on which to sit warm and busy indoors, revelling in the peace and security from interruption, but just now, with the completion of his work, there was nothing to be busy about, and he felt he would have welcomed an interruption of almost any sort. How eagerly he would have hailed the advent, say, of Dora Winton, with that baffling attractive face, and that mind . . . what was her mind like? Like a room full of queer corners; till you had turned into them, you could not be sure what you would find there. She was kind and cynical and curious, and above all, somehow intensely modern, belonging to the generation that had no more principles than drifting thistledown, which bowled along wherever the warm wind took it, but was intensely on the alert for sensations. And, above all, she had the merit of taking living lightly, the sparkle of its surface was all she asked. Or, at this moment Rex would have delighted in the entrance of the colossal Mr. Fortescue, would have ecstatically listened to his sonorous periods, gloating in the appreciation of one so magnificently boring. Or Oliver: no, he was not sure that he entirely wanted Oliver. He could be a charming companion, but he had a quality about him to which you had to live up. Rex did not want to live up to anybody or anybody's standards just now. It struck him that he had done a good deal of that lately: his mind seemed rather stiff with the exercise, and he wanted relaxation.

He drew his chair up to the fire with his back to the

window, so as to shut out the rain-streaked sea-fog. He felt desolately befogged himself in this dead calm: he, too, could have hooted aloud, proclaiming that he was lost and companionless. True, there was companionship if he cared to go and find it, for his mother would put aside all her occupations, if he presented himself in her room. She would look up with a sunlight of welcome and say, "Now, that is nice! Come and make yourself comfortable, and let's have a talk." She would ask him what he had been doing, and what he meant to do this afternoon. She would condole with him on this fiendish day; all her brain and heart would be eager to divert and interest him. She would plunge into any discussion that he initiated: she would teem with tentative subjects of her own, but she would not be able to give him what he wanted. Sometimes he wondered whether she perceived that. He thought that she did, and then she would make more efforts, and he would make efforts in response. They arrived at nothing that way except general strain, and all the time Rex knew that he had only got to be natural and cheerful to make her happy. He knew he could do that for her. . . . Though she had so lately lost him who for twenty-five years had filled her life's thoughts and activities, and though, Rex divined, she missed him in every step on the staircase, and every opening of a door, he knew that it was in his power to fill that immense void. She could adjust herself to her widowhood, without sense of loss, if he could adjust himself to her conception of him as a son. Her devotion to the dead was not, in the vitality of her love, a book finished and bitterly closed. Rather, it lay open to her still, like some splendid illuminated manuscript, in which she richly read. It was, in one sense, com-

plete, down to the last page with its colophon, but in another, it was like some story without an end, mounting into the illegible splendour of pages as yet indecipherable. Somewhere he was pursuing that story, not yet revealed to her mortal eyes. That story was not closed at all, it was only she who, unable to follow it, turned with all the insatiable hunger of love to what she could feed on and feed. And that, Rex knew, was himself.

There was her beauty, and though he knew its divine brightness, it exasperated him. Already in her own mind, her love so illuminated her memory of his father, that he was gilded and glorified into a figure that bore no real resemblance to him. Rex himself, he was aware, shared in this retrospective glorification, and when, in real life, the fact of the matter had been that he and his father had lost their tempers with each other, she saw them now as two splendid breezy demi-gods, deeply loving each other, and sparring with laughter and mutual appreciation. His father's ill-natured complaints of her management of the house, was set down to his instinct for perfection, his growls if a book in his library was out of place to his genius for order, his scoldings if dinner was not ready for him when he was ready for dinner, to his exquisite sense of the value of time, to his hatred of squandering in idleness moments that might be profitably occupied. She saw the past through the sunlit mist of her love : she breathed a finer air rarefied and celestial, while Rex, increasingly as the quiet days went by, longed for an hour or two in some bar or smoking-room, so to speak, with the reek of rollicking, unedifying human beings and the fumes of beer and tobacco. He had his own rarefied air of mental effort and concentration over his play, and to come out from that, wanting relaxation,

and find himself in a finer atmosphere yet of idealizing devotion, was suffocating rather than stimulating.

At the base of it all was the irritating falseness in his position. Avowedly in his mother's conception, he had done a beautiful and loving thing in cutting himself off from the diversions of London and making himself her companion at home to fill, as best he could, the void in her life. But he knew very well that there had been no unselfishness in this. He had wanted first of all to have done with his work in the solicitor's office, and to devote himself to dramatic ambitions, and he had thought that to live here with her would give him tranquil and admirable conditions for his work, in surroundings that he loved, and in his comfortable home. Moreover, though he would have been chary of confessing it, the view that both Oliver and his mother took of his occupation of Mrs. Winton's flat, made him glad to have done with it. However modern a measure you took of your friends, as being mere quarries out of whom you hewed your blocks of convenient material, there was something ugly about putting yourself under obligations which you did not repay even by the consciousness of friendship. He would have gone back to his own tolerable squalor in Brompton Square without a moment's delay, if Mrs. Winton had returned, and asked him to stay on, not from any construction that could have been placed on his cohabitation, but simply because he would have preferred dingy solitude to her companionship. Such a couple of rooms as he had there would now be the utmost compassable if his mother was to continue living here, for the death duties, for which his father had made no provision, must be paid by a reduction of capital, and Rex by his altered will had no income whatever of his

own. Everything had been left to his mother and the reasons for it briefly and unmistakably stated. Rex, as he thought of that, felt his dislike of his father well up within him, blotting out, as this sea-mist expunged the marshes outside, the loving delineation of him, over which his mother so sedulously mused. It was a ludicrous sentimentality to say that his father and he mutually forgave each other for all their past antipathies, when the very last recorded wish of his father's was that of punishing him. There was a fine gesture of forgiveness and reconciliation! Rex's fingers itched to knock over the microscope which stood in the window, and which his father prized so much, and stamp on its screws and tubes and lenses.

The midday post brought him a letter in a handwriting which he instantly recognized, though he had only once seen it before. It was very characteristic, he thought, of the writer, admirably firm and deliberate, with the letters much spaced and unconnected with each other, as if they had a separate significance of their own, apart from their contribution to the words they helped to form. Mrs. Winton's smallest actions were like that: they impressed you individually. . . . She wrote from the flat in Mount Street, to which she told him she had just returned.

"There never was such a caretaker as you," she said; "my household were in a marvellous state of efficiency. What moral weapon did you use, Rex? Love or fear? Love, I expect, for they all seem to have adored you.

"And so you have settled down in your home with your mother. That is perfectly charming of you, and she must love it, doesn't she? I hope it is being the greatest success. You will have any amount of time for your own work too, which will suit you. But it's really

wonderful of a wild bird like you (we settled you were a wild bird, do you remember?) to become so domestic. I wonder if you are being really domestic, or are performing the cleverest tricks in acting as if you were domestic. I rather think so: you can't have altered so radically.

"London is its damp dingy self, but it's extremely pleasant. We all say we hate it, but how we come flying back to it! There isn't any decalogue here (how we were all down on the decalogue that evening), and though I don't want to break or keep any commandments, it's comfortable to know that there aren't any to be broken. I don't covet my neighbour's ox or his ass (in fact, I don't believe my neighbour has got any, for I hear no sounds of braying through the walls) and the Sabbath day is quite unviolated by my work, because I never do any then or throughout the week. In fact, I wish I did, and when I come to think of it perhaps I do envy people like you, who are so keen about their work that they are totally indifferent to the entire human race.

"How are the marshes? Bathed in primrose-coloured sun, I suppose. And how long is your filialness to banish you? Don't waste your entire youth over the sea-lavender, and remember that it's terribly ageing to live in the country. You have it all your own way in the country: nobody contradicts you and worries you, and being contradicted and worried keeps the mind lissom: it's a sort of mental massage.

"Well, it's time for me to dress. Two or three people are coming to dine, Oliver among them. I saw him a night or two ago, and, rather acidly, he could give me no news of you. He gave me the impression that he thought it none of my business. . . . Let me know when

you spread your wings again in this direction, and give me news of yourself and the play."

Rex read this through with a kindled eye. It was all the lightest froth and babble, but somehow it gave him a whiff of the air which he longed to breathe.

It was not so much the individual touch of the writer that took him away from the rain dripping through the sea-fog, as the general atmosphere with which she saturated it. . . . She flitted over topics, serious and trivial alike, scarcely alighting: they just swayed under her touch and straightened themselves again, after she had gathered the tiniest drop of honey. The topic retained its life: it was not plucked and pressed and dried. . . . He could take himself and his chosen topic seriously enough, but when his work was done, he wanted the relaxation of mild mockery and irresponsibility. She mocked at him, and he found himself grinning at it. She shrugged her shoulders at his bumpkin life, and then she shrugged them at something else, Oliver and his acidity. It was a relief, it was a stimulus to be gently laughed at, not to be loved and watched over. . . . Or was there (though he had just denied it) an individual touch about her letter that suited him? If Oliver had written in just that strain, he would have found fault with him for not saying what he felt. He would have felt that Oliver was repressing something. It was just the impression that he didn't matter to Mrs. Winton combined with the knowledge that she certainly cared for him, which gave her scribbling that refreshing quality. She made no demands, and she saw through him, not as through a stained-glass window, but through an uncoloured pane.

And even while he appreciated that, he found a chal-

lenge in it. Had she then given him the hospitality of her flat, as she might throw a morsel to some pleasant little dog that had strolled into her cognizance? He did not feel that this was her notion of him. But if it was not that . . . Rex found himself attracted and repelled simultaneously. He was not attracted by her kindness but by her indifference: he was not repelled by her indifference but by the generosity which had cost her nothing. Anyhow, her entrancing lightness had lifted the sea-fog. Probably there were other effects. . . .

The door opened and his mother came in with the daily paper. She gave him one quick glance, and he knew its meaning. He had been silent and glum at breakfast, and she had tried so hard to interest him. But there was better weather in his face now.

"My dear, what a morning!" she said. "I came to stir you up, for it's close on lunch-time, and it's always a good thing to knock off for a bit, as your father used to call it, before lunch. He said you oughtn't to go on thinking up till the time you begin eating. Nature loved a vacuum, he used to say, in one place before she began filling the other."

Rex made a little effort, so small and so successful.

"I remember," he said. "He used to go up and down that path there for a quarter of an hour. Even when it poured. What was his word? Yes: decobwebizing. . . . But I would sooner keep my cobwebs than get them wet. Any news?"

She folded back the paper to the middle page.

"More trouble in the Ruhr," she said. "What do you think about it, Rex? Aren't the French being very short-sighted? Your father always said that they couldn't see a thing in its perspective, that they only

saw it at close-range. That's being wonderfully borne out in this crisis. Don't you think so? "

"It looks like it. Any other news? "

She glanced at the next column.

"Yes, more treasures from the tomb they've found in Egypt. How tremendous it is! The throne has been brought out. But I hope they'll leave the mummy there, if they find it. I can't see that the mere lapse of time makes any difference. If we went and dug up the body of Charles I, and put it in the British Museum, it would be thought sacrilegious. What do you feel about it? "

Rex made another effort.

"Oh, I quite agree," he said. "But, after all, the personal interest in an Egyptian king has been decreasing for three thousand years, and the historical interest increasing. It's a shifting equation, isn't it? "

"Yes, that's true. A completely fossilized man, now. I shouldn't mind his being put in a museum at all. You have to hold the balance between sentiment and science. I wonder what your father would have thought about it. They wanted to move some graves, I remember, in the churchyard here to make the corner of the road less sharp, and he strongly opposed it."

Rex found his interest in Tutankhamen completely evaporated. Was it the mention of his father's firm views about the sacredness of graves that had caused it so completely to disappear?

"I had a jolly letter from Mrs. Winton by this post," he said. "She's back in town."

Mrs. Goodwin had decreed to herself a friendly neutrality with the idea of Mrs. Winton. She was a friend of Rex's, she had lent him her flat in her absence. . . . Those were the only data she allowed herself to deal with.

"Tell me about her," she said. "What news does she give you? Anything about Oliver? Didn't you say you met her first at Oliver's?"

Rex laughed.

"Yes. She says she saw Oliver not long ago, and described him as slightly acid. Oliver can be, you know, when he doesn't have things just his own way."

"He's devoted to you, Rex," she said. "I expect he hates your leaving London."

"But that wasn't Mrs. Winton's fault," he said. "It was yours."

The glance of her love shone on him, but he could not give it an answering brightness. It lingered for a moment, and then she slid the shutter over it again.

"I feel dreadfully greedy sometimes," she said. "But I mustn't be."

"How do you mean?" he asked.

"My darling, how can I help wondering now and then, if I've got a right to tie you like this? Don't you find it dreadfully dull sometimes? You must: at least you ought to."

They were getting into the deeps again, those profound and beautiful deeps of hers, which Rex knew and loved but in which sometimes he felt stifled. . . . He wanted air and sparkle, not that sweet seriousness.

"Why ought I to feel dull?" he demanded. "Is it a new commandment 'Be bored with thy father and mother'?"

"Rex, don't be profane. But won't you ask Oliver down here some time. Or Mrs. Winton?" she added. "I want to know your friends. It brings me more into touch with you."

Rex could not go on. . . . He had to make a diversion:

it could be a skirmish in the same sort of direction. Somehow that letter had exhilarated him: it blew away for the time at any rate the fogginess and depression.

"Just wait till my play comes out and has a huge success," he said. "I shall have a flat—no, I think a house—in London, and you shall live there with me, and know all my friends, and you'll have this house here and I shall live with you. That's a serious plan, you know. It's going to happen, I promise you. I shall have a motor, and we'll drive up and down between our town and country seats. 'The brilliant young dramatist and his venerable mother,' the papers will say, 'attended the first night of his new play, and drove down to their country seat at Roughton afterwards. No news of their arrival has yet come to hand, but as they have only been three days *en route*, it is still hoped that they may prove to be safe. But as Mr. Rex Goodwin was at the wheel, it seems to be a practical certainty that a disaster has occurred.' Go on, Ma, I can't think of anything more. Besides, it's lunch-time."

Futile as all this was, it strangely comforted her to hear Rex talking nonsense again, for no one could be spontaneous and silly like that with his barometer low. Certainly his barometer had often been low lately, and no effort of hers seemed able to give him fine weather. That plan of his to leave London and live here with her had been so sweet to her, coming voluntarily from him, that at first she could not doubt its success. For herself, it was everything to her to have Rex with her: nothing else, with all the kingdoms of the world to choose from, could have filled the aching void which her husband's death had left, or kept at a distance the remorse and regrets that sat ready to pounce on her.

Devoted as her whole life had been to his service, so that she had scarcely had any independent existence of her own, she seemed now to herself to have utterly failed in devotion and in the wisdom of love. His hardnesses, his stern standards had to her now become mellowed into an earnest seriousness of purpose, of which she had been wholly unworthy: what had been his defects she had made hers, and her only atonement now was to be worthy of Rex's love, for he stood to her not only for himself, but for his father also. His happiness, his welfare were to her the great remaining purpose of her life, and that he should have chosen to find them with her was a gift unutterably sweet. But already she had wondered with a pain like the first premonitory twinges of a headache which are but the warnings of worse to come, whether she was right in letting him sequester himself here with her. He loved her, his work seemed to prosper, but was it possible that he did not miss the stir and gaiety which were natural to his years? She felt that he did: his silence and his efforts betrayed that, and she seemed incapable of supplying him with what gave him ease and relaxation. Perhaps in the very nature of things it was impossible that she should, and she must acquiesce and release him. Because her heart desired no companion but him, it did not follow that he wanted no companion but her.

But here he was, above all on this day of fog and gloom, quite himself again with nonsense bubbling from his lips, and continuing as they lunched together to pour itself out in happy inconsequent floods. It was sheer sunlight to her to see him like that and though it might only be a mood, it was impossible for her, with her mercurial nature, easily depressed and ever so quick to respond to joy, not to bask in it. . . . Afterwards,

scorning the inclemencies, he went swinging off for a walk across the marsh. He would come back, he said, cold and soaked to the skin, and after a wallowing hot bath they would have a great evening over the play, and waving at him as he disappeared into the fog, she went back into the house.

The jobs that had occupied her all the morning, so that the rest of the day might be free, were all done now, and with Rex gone, even though he would be out only a few hours, and his nonsense still pealed in her ears, she suddenly felt utterly lonely and purposeless. All support seemed withdrawn, she sank like some plummet in a grey sea, and reaction from the faith and fortitude that for these weeks had sustained her, poured over her. Just here she had sat, when her husband with voice hard and rasping with anger had railed against Rex, as he recounted that terrible interview he had had with him a few hours before. There was a searing reality about that, which burned its way through all her loyalties and interpretations. With the love that carries all burdens she had taken his daily grimnesses and hardnesses upon herself, saying that she had been weak in the love which should have dissolved them into the mellowness with which now she interpreted them, blaming herself, but not too bitterly, for surely his emancipated spirit understood and forgave. But here, over his passionate denunciation of Rex, she was up against some grim wall, the hardness and horror of which she could not take on herself. Dimly through these weeks, while she turned away from it, assuring herself that by the mercy of God it was not there, she had realized that she must face it, and now, wherever she turned, it faced her.

Francis had emptied the utmost of his wrath on to his

son and hers, and the very storm and tempest of it was what had stricken him, so that unforgiving and unforgiven, his own anger had broken him, and he died in her arms. It had got to be faced, and facing it, she could not believe that in that supreme moment he was reconciled with Rex, nor had his death reconciled Rex to him. It was quite in vain that she talked to him of his father's splendour and moral rectitude, for in Rex's soul was the knowledge that, whatever she explained and mollified, there was the deep-bitten plate which recorded his dying father's enmity. All her tenderness and her prayers could not alter that, nor could they withdraw from Rex his knowledge of it. That wild gasping gabble of anger which had horrified and wrung her heart was just a repetition of what he had said to Rex himself. She had told Rex that his father had spoken in unconsidered anger, which he would certainly have been sorry for if he had lived, and that, now he saw with clarified vision, he claimed the reconciliation of his death. But that was surmise ; what Rex knew was that with his dying breath his father had abhorred and punished him. With whatever mellowness his mother tried to soften the scraps and quarrels that went before, she could not soften that. Francis could not have judged Rex with that inexorable cruelty if he had loved him, and her own love for her son flamed like a fiery sword between him and her husband. Though her heart burned to reconcile them, it was her heart that severed them. Francis must not come near Rex, if he felt like that towards him : her mother-love fierce and strong stood between them. . . .

The darkness of the soul was upon her, and all that she knew of love, human or divine, seemed powerless to pierce it. She brought the two, each hand in hand with

her, to the Founder of all love, and their hands slipped from her, and they stood apart and hostile : no power of hers could appease them. This way and that she raised the entreaty of her hands and heart, but how they mocked at her feebleness ! And when in the despair of her weakness and her blindness, she bowed herself down before the Infinite Compassion, no touch of the divine pity and consolation seemed to reach her. Did it exist at all then ? Surely the most callous and hard-hearted of human beings, if she appealed like this, would have given her some token of sympathy. But from the mercy-seat itself, from which all compassion and love sprang, there was nothing for her. Love itself seemed to be dead. She held out her heart to it, and no ray pierced her darkness.

The desolation closed in on her : she was quite alone, and the sobs, hard and rebelled against at first, rose thicker in her throat till she yielded utterly. Not since he had died had she cried like this, such tears as she had shed had been of human weakness : now it was her human strength which inundated her and her longing. . . . She knew nothing of the passing minutes, nor heard the door of her room open. But then there came the sound of the voice which would have made her turn back from the very gates of death for one more look at him, and Rex stood by her.

He had been in two minds when he entered and saw the abandonment of her weeping as to whether he should not steal quietly out again, for such sorrow as hers seemed secret and inviolable : even a son's eyes perhaps should not look on it. And yet he could not leave her like that.

She sat up, still blind with tears, and he knelt down by her, and all the best of him went out to her.

" Oh, my dear, you're awfully unhappy," he said. " I am sorry."

She could not speak to him yet, but he knew that he had reached her, for she leant towards him, her hand on his shoulder.

" Don't speak, mother," he said. " Go on crying. I'm going to stop with you, unless you want me to go. Just nod your head if you want me to go."

Her hand tightened on his shoulder, and presently from his strength she drew control. Her sobbing ceased.

" Oh, Rex, I've been so miserable," she said. " Utterly, utterly miserable, in outer darkness."

Her hand strayed down the sleeve of his coat.

" Ah, my dear, you're wet through," she said. " You mustn't stop here with me."

" Well, you're wet through, too," he said. " We'll go and dry ourselves presently. . . . Now I'm not going to have you miserable. Shan't stand it for a moment. What's it all about ? "

The masculinity of this was exactly right : she wanted just that firm touch. His little joke about her being wet through also . . . that was Rex all over.

For a moment she did not answer him. It seemed impossible to tell that even to Rex. And yet it concerned him, it was about him and that other, some silent witness perhaps watching to see if she could put things right with Rex. So full the house was of memories of him, that it did not seem fanciful or strange to think that he might be here, in that world of the spirit which cuts across the material plane like sunlight through smoke, and mingles with it. . . . She would be failing him once more, as she had so often failed him in life, if she did not do what she could.

"Oh, my dear, it's about you and your father," she said. "You parted with him in anger, the last words that passed between you were bitter and hostile. It pierces my heart that he should have gone from us, thinking of you like that. There was no time for me to reason with him and convince him. And to-day everything has failed me, my faith, my belief, everything on which I rest. I'm in darkness. I know he exists, but I can't feel it, I can't reach him. But you're here: help me, Rex."

For a long minute Rex wrestled with himself. He had stiffened and grown remote from her when she spoke of the enmity between him and his father as the cause of her trouble, and ranged himself against not only it but her. In death as in life his father was still coming between them, making unhappiness and worry. . . . And then suddenly he saw that this intrusion depended not on his father any more, but on him. He could lay that ghost for his mother by repudiating the intrusion, by merely denying the enmity. Whether his father now existed consciously or unconsciously, he neither knew nor cared: it was enough that he could not, except by Rex's own choice, worry him any more.

He must do it so as to bring conviction to her: he must put all his love for her into the crackling emptiness of what his father meant to him.

"You must never think of all this again, mother," he said. "It's all past. If my father said and thought hard things about me—and, God, he had reason enough—they don't exist any more. It's I who destroy them. . . . Really, I suppose it's you who've destroyed them, because you burn them up in your love for me and him. And as for all the bitter things I thought of him, I bring

them to you now, to put them on the same fire. Tear them up, put them in. Why, it blazes even more brightly for them. They don't choke it . . ."

He saw the heavenly brightness grow on her face, and for the moment felt so utterly degraded that he almost cried out: "It's all lies: don't believe a word of what I have been saying." And yet, where was the harm? His assurance meant everything to her, and nothing to him. It hurt no one, and it healed her.

Chapter X

IT was only wise that when Rex came down presently from his bath, she should let nothing of their talk, shadow or brightness, betray itself in her welcome of him. She would have loved to talk it over with him, to tell him what he had done for her, to let her love inundate her even as her tears had done, but that would be wholly unwise. Rex, even more than most men, hated the expression of sentiment: it embarrassed him, it sounded mawkish, it wasn't a thing to be talked about. The more you felt, the less you said. . . .

Here he was then, ruddy from his bath, and smelling of soap, with his hair dried back into crispness, and the blue veins on his hands still standing out from their hot immersion. No one ever looked so clean as Rex: cleanliness was in him a positive quality, not only the negative quality of not being dirty. He brought with him the typewritten copy of his play.

"Ah, I'm going to have such a lovely evening," she said. "One act now, is it, and two after dinner? I know when you've finished the first, I shan't be able to let you stop."

He was rather on the defensive against sentiment. . . .

"Don't be too sure you're going to have a lovely

evening," he said. "You may not like it. I think it's rash of me to read it you at all."

"But the fact of your reading it makes my lovely evening," said she.

"Not if you don't like it," he said.

She knew that if she didn't like it, the fact of its being read by Rex would make it ever so much worse.

"Am I to tell you if I don't?" she asked.

He laughed.

"There won't be the slightest need. I shall feel it like—like a cold draught," said he. "But I don't want you to like or dislike it because it's mine. I happen to be reading a play—any play—to you: that's all. Try to think of it just as something that occurred: there were people like that, and they did things like these. If it's interesting, it's good: if it's dull it's bad. . . . Now I shall make myself very comfortable and begin."

Rex had an excellent voice for reading, very clear, very unemotional, presenting her with what he had written, sharp-cut and unmistakable, and letting her imagination weave the atmosphere around it. Indeed, there was little weaving to be done; those characters of his with their quick witty comments and retorts not only built up the situation, but, unerringly, themselves and their whole attitude towards the circumstances in which Rex discovered them. They did not appear as yet to have any souls, they were just bright polished machines, content to flash and whirl on their well-oiled bearings. . . . And to her (in spite of Rex's injunction) they represented not only themselves, but some environment Rex knew and expanded in. Probably that was what he got in London: Oliver had a touch of it, and she suspected that Mrs. Winton had more than a touch of it. It was only a

guess: Rex was always reticent about his friends. . . . But for the present it was very diverting: they talked so lightly about serious things and trivial things alike: there was a delightful sunlight glinting on them.

"Oh, Rex, they're charming," she said. "I see them all. I love the play and ripple of them. But I won't interrupt."

Still with the daintiest lightness they began to concentrate their talk, illustrated hitherto by these flippant generalities that mocked and smiled and were genially cynical, on a situation. 'She,' some Cynthia, who had not yet appeared, was coming home from a prolonged absence, free at last from her matrimonial bond, and they wondered how she would take Hugo's marriage. Of course it was a long time ago that she and Hugo had—yes, exactly—but you could not state a time-limit. Seeds and grain had been found in ancient Egyptian tombs which when planted exhibited surprising vitality. . . . Anyhow, it was very clever of Hugo's wife to ask Cynthia to come and stay with them. Or was it very stupid? A little discussion fireworked to and fro as to whether Hugo's wife was clever or stupid. How impossible it was sometimes to distinguish: an apparent blunder might prove to be the most subtly calculated manœuvre or a finesse . . . like Bridge, you know, when the third hand does something knavish, and catches the queen next round. Here were Hugo and his wife in any case, just coming in from the garden. Was Cynthia to prove an angel with a fiery sword who would banish them from their Paradise? The sequel in that case would not be wholly Biblical, for the angel would sheathe the sword, and pop back with Adam into those sequestered glades, and leave Eve to rear her family outside.

The outline of the triangle was thus pretty firmly indicated in the first act, adorned, it is true, with delicious flowers at which these verbal butterflies sipped so pleasantly, but when, after dinner, Rex proceeded to outline it more in the second act, the flowers, to his mother's mind, became deadly and poisonous blossoms, and the butterflies that so airily ranged over them, stinging and dangerous insects. But the lightness and the mockery never failed: all that was sound in life, love, marriage, childbirth were no more than convenient little torches at which to light these squibs and scintillating fireworks. . . . Yet it was all so clever, so brilliantly amusing, and even while it hurt and wounded her, she was so proud of Rex's wit. But it was so ugly, so cynical. . . .

He came to the end and threw the typewritten sheets on the table.

"And I suppose they lived pretty happily ever afterwards," he said. "So that's that. And I am so thirsty."

For this last hour he had felt that draught of which he spoke, and he resented it. It blew more strongly than ever now from that face which regarded him, half puzzled half appealing, half admiring.

"Well?" he said, as she kept silence, helping himself to whisky and soda.

"Oh, Rex, my dear, thanks ever so much for reading it to me," she said. "It's wonderfully written. Your dialogue is perfectly sparkling. Such wit, such lightness, such exquisite little unexpected turns. I don't know that I can criticize: it all dazzles me. And very likely you don't want me to criticize."

"No, do criticize," he said. "Tell me just what you think."

She leaned forward, warming her hands at the fire.

The flames shone through her fingers, and suddenly he remembered how Mrs. Winton had sat like that when she expounded some theory of love and its after-effects to him one evening at her flat. He would have liked her criticism immensely at this moment; if a wish could have transformed his mother into her for the next half-hour, she would certainly have been sitting there.

"Oh, it's all sparkling with humour," she said, "and those bits of by-play are wonderful. You sketch your characters so well, too. I see them: I feel them."

He knew exactly what she felt. She was saying all the nice things she could find. "But?" he suggested, as she paused again.

"My darling, it's so horrid," she said with an effort. "That's what I really feel about it. A man with any sense of right would have put himself in his wife's place. He would have cut himself off from Cynthia completely, when he saw that he was drifting back. How fascinating she is too; I quite feel that. A man like Hugo must have been frightfully attracted. . . . But he wasn't fine. He ought to have done something else."

Her face brightened.

"Oh, Rex, couldn't he?" she asked. "Couldn't you change that, and let him see, before it was too late, the danger of it all? That would make such a splendid end."

"But the play would evaporate," said Rex. "There wouldn't be any play."

"But surely there would. You could write a glorious third act, showing how he struggled against his lower nature, and conquered it."

Rex felt a tremor of impatience. "But he would have to have been quite a different sort of Hugo," he said "The whole point is that he is weak and not strong."

She looked puzzled.

"Yes, yes, I see that," she said. "But couldn't some new influence come into his life, which strengthens him, and makes him see——"

Rex saw: he saw the hopelessness of the discussion.

"That might do for another play," he said. "But it wouldn't be this play."

She did not realize, he told himself, what a play permitted you to do. You could not suddenly introduce an ennobling influence which made your weak and vicious people into models of strength and virtue. . . .

"I feel sure that somehow you could transform it," she said. "It is rather terrible as it stands; Hugo doesn't even struggle to act honourably and uprightly."

"No, he found himself in love again with Cynthia," said Rex.

"Yes, yes. But that was so weak of him. He ought to have tried, at any rate, to be loyal to his wife. That was a horrible thing you made him say about her being a woman whom it was so easy to fall in love with, and so difficult not to get tired of."

"But she was," said Rex. "At least I've tried to make her like that."

"I know: of course she must have been maddening in some ways. That's wonderfully done. But it's just because of that, that he would have shown himself so splendid."

"But he wasn't splendid," said Rex.

"But it would be so fine if he realized that in spite of all the attraction Cynthia had for him, his duty towards his wife, and his love for her——"

Rex frowned: he mustn't let himself get snappy, but it was hard not to feel impatient.

"But he hadn't any love for her," he said. "It had gone, it had evaporated. He rather hated her."

He got up.

"Well, there it is," he said shortly.

He was sorry for the curtness of that, the moment he had said it, and came and sat on the floor at her feet, leaning back against her knees. She loved to have him there: he made a child of himself again when he did that.

"Never mind the silly old play," he said. "No doubt the manager to whom I shall send it to-morrow will quite agree with you that it's a trumpery thing. Here are you and I, anyhow, and what's wrong with that?"

She rested her hands on his low broad shoulders.

"My darling, as if that isn't the best thing in the world," she said. "And haven't you given me evidence of it to-day? You've made yourself more precious to me than ever, and I didn't know it was possible. I—no, I won't go on. But I love the way you went straight into the middle of my heart, and did just what I needed. That's all: I won't talk about it."

The spring was long in emerging from the cold clutch of winter, and as the days went on she began to see with growing distinctness how impossible this life here alone with her was for Rex. She saw it with infinite regret, but without a single pang of bitterness. She had hoped for the impossible; it was not natural or human that he could be happy like this. He was growing, he needed the stimulus of active life and companionship. For her, there were the management of her household, and her visitings among the village folk to occupy her, while for him there was nothing. She, too, was of an age when the memories of the past were stored for provender,

and he had yet his garners to fill with harvestings. He needed the strong savour of life, and how right and proper that was, while for her the westering sun had long passed the meridian of adventurous hours. She felt that she would be stunting his growth with doled and desiccated food if she let him stop here. He had wanted to come and live with her ; it had never been contemplated by her until he suggested it, and though she looked forward to what her life would be without him, with utter blankness, she saw that she could not allow him to stop. To do so would not be showing love for him but indulgence of herself. She loved Rex being here for her own sake, not his.

The crystallization of all that led up to this formulated statement came quite suddenly. She had known it, her mind was really saturated with it, but it had not taken shape, until the ingredients, as by some chemical cohesion rushed together, and made the hard clear conviction. All this last week since the night when he had read the play, the grouping had gone on, fluid at present. . . . He had been tremendously absorbed in some work which occupied him most of the day, and certainly kept him up long after she had gone to bed, for night after night she had waited to hear the creak of his footstep on a loose board outside her room. Then, by a chance admission, she had learned that he was at work on a new play, but he told her nothing about it. He puzzled and frowned over it, he leapt into light over it, was cheerful and talkative for a minute or two : then withdrew himself again into some windowless chamber of his own. If there had been a congenial and sympathetic listener, she felt that he would have discussed and dissected, unburdening himself by the very fact of communication, from the puzzles that he set himself. But, after that rather night-

marish evening, he told her nothing about his work. He did not want (and he had every right not to want) the species of criticism which she had given him. What he wanted was trained technical criticism as to treatment, not moral reflections about the situation. She blamed herself for not seeing that sooner, and now his reticence punished not only her but himself.

But most of all she knew he missed the indefinable relaxation and amusement which was natural to his age and sex. She had urged on him to get any friend or succession of friends to come and stay with him. More than once she had definitely suggested Oliver, but for some reason Rex did not appear to want him. Perhaps they had had some quarrel or estrangement: she did not know, and Rex did not enlighten her. Or perhaps he thought that Oliver would find it intolerably dull. . . . In London, when he was 'fed up' with his work, he could go to his club: there were theatres, there were dinings-out, with the news of the hour, the gossip, the hundred topics which sparkle, as by some spontaneous generation, when even the most casual acquaintances are gathered together. Here there was none of that: he did not care about the domestic concerns of the village: the fact that some fisherman's wife was ill, that the new curate was too ritualistic for the tastes of the more Protestant section of the congregation, that the organist had positively refused to play the "Agnus Dei" in the Communion Service, that the doctor had told the professional invalid of the place that she was perfectly well and would feel so if she would only go about her business instead of lying in bed, produced no tremor of interest in him. He was simply bored with such topics: he said 'Oh,' or 'Really,' or with effort tried to ask an intelligent

question about them. Sometimes they played chess, but that was scarcely better, for at any moment, if Rex really attended to the game, he could land her in inextricable difficulties, and she knew that it was rather a relief to him when she went up to bed and he could get to work again. Both in his work and his amusement he wanted, and rightly wanted, what she and Roughton could not give him. In the summer when he could spend his day out on the Point, bathing and basking and watching the birds, it was different, but there were months to be got through yet before that, and she could not face them for him.

She had come up to her room very early one night, for the hours after dinner had been deadly, and all she could do was to cut them short and enable him to get back to his play. He had been dully and depressedly silent: it was not, she saw, that he was deliberately so, but simply that he could not rouse himself to any show of gaiety or amusement. So with the excuse of being tired, she had left him, with the crystallization of her resolve complete, and now she must go into the question of ways and means. His father's allowance to him of £300 a year had not been enough: she felt sure that he would not have lived on Mrs. Winton's hospitality if he had been able to have comfortable rooms of his own, with an ample margin for the diversions which were necessary luxuries to any young man. He must have at least a hundred more, that was the very minimum, and perhaps she could contrive another fifty. Looking into her household expenses here, she found there were several economies which could certainly be made. She could manage, for instance, with one servant less: three could look after everything when she was alone, and when Rex or one of their rare visitors came, she could get help

from the village. She would shut up several rooms, which would make the work less heavy, and she could make, with simpler meals, an appreciable reduction in her household books. She had some good jewels too, which she seldom or never wore : they could be sold to make ends meet if necessary. Rex ought to manage comfortably on £450, and he must never know that she was cutting down her expenditure here to the finest limit. Yes, she could just do it : she was sure it could be managed.

" Oh, and the joy of it ! " she said to herself, her heart leaping at the thought of his liberty. Her own loneliness, the blankness of his absence gave her no moment just then of pause or pang. It was unnoticeable in the relief from that enormous ache about him, which had been growing every day more insupportable.

There came the creak of the loose board outside her door. It might not be he, for it was early for him to go to bed, but she called his name. She could not keep till the morning what she had to tell him : she would tell him now when the fire and joy of her sacrifice leapt up together and in that fine heat the prospect of the loneliness of the days without him cast no chill. With joy and love she would tell him.

He entered, heavy-eyed and gloomy.

" Did you call me ? " he said.

" Yes, Rex," she said. " I want to have a little talk with you."

" Won't to-morrow do ? " he asked.

" No, Rex. Give me just ten nimutes now."

He sat down on the sofa at the end of her bed, and she spoke. She took no thought whatever of what she was going to say, or how to say it, for it was not her brain that was to direct her, but her heart.

"My darling, let me speak without any interruption," she said. "Just your hand in mine. . . . Rex, you mustn't live down here any longer with me. You gave me the most beautiful gift any son could give his mother: you came to me when nothing in the world could reach me except you and your love, and I bless and thank you for it. Perhaps I oughtn't to have allowed it at all, but it was so unutterably sweet to me that I couldn't refuse it. If it was selfish of me, you must forgive me for it. But it can't go on. I see that now. My dear, how you have tried to be happy here! What splendid efforts you have made every day and hour! But it's beyond your power; it would be quite unnatural and wrong that you should maim yourself and starve yourself. If you got used to it, it would be worse still, for it would mean that you weren't growing and living up to your capacity. So I can't let you do it any longer. I take your intentions and I take your love, and nothing can ever part me from them. But I should be showing myself both unwise, which is bad, and unloving, which is worse, if I let you stop with me. . . ."

She paused a moment, looking at him with eyes soft and radiant, but when he opened his mouth to speak she shook her head.

"Not yet," she said. "There's a little more. Now we must look at the practical side of it, and I've been doing so. What your father gave you, I think was insufficient: things are horribly expensive, and I don't see how you can manage on that. But I find that I can afford you more: there are only two of us now. I can give you four hundred and fifty a year. I think that ought to be enough: we shall see how it works. Whenever you want rest and holiday, how lovely it will be to have you

here, or whenever you want quiet and seclusion. But you don't always want them: you can't always want them: it would be very wrong of you if you did. Anyhow, I can manage that sum I mentioned quite easily, and it will be pure joy and self-indulgence for me to give it you. So let's consider that settled. . . .

"My darling, I believe that's all I need say. You've given me your love in all its fullness, and I give you mine. Wherever you are, you're with me, just my son, my dearest and best."

Chapter XI

REX was sitting at work in the window of his new quarters, high up in a house of flats overlooking Hyde Park. It had been a great piece of luck to get them: they belonged to Leonard Hobhouse, who had been sent to Rome on a diplomatic mission, which would occupy him there for a couple of months, and he was glad to take a small rent for so short a tenure. Soon, for one month of the two was already gone, Rex would have to look out for something else, but something was sure to turn up. . . .

It had been hard to get to work that morning, for he found to welcome him on his breakfast table both of his plays, which had been returned to him 'with thanks' by the theatrical managers to whom he had submitted them. The first, *Bread of Deceit*, was already getting a little dog-eared at the edges (proof that it had really been read) and he would have to get it recopied, as its travel-worn appearance gave it an unsuccessful aspect: it seemed to invite further refusals. The second, *Adam and Eve*, had just experienced its first rebuff, and was good for a few more journeys yet. But Rex had squared

his elbows, and put his chin out, and now, after a half-hour of slippery and wandering thought, was concentrated and absorbed again. Indeed, he was reacting from this cold douche of failure ; the shivering of disappointment was past, and had been succeeded by the glow of undefeatable determination.

A couple of hours passed before his focussed attention wavered, and putting down his pen, he threw wide the window which faced on to a narrow balcony on a level with the tree-tops of the Park. The tide of warm air, charged with the revivification of spring, poured in, setting his pages a-flutter. Only yesterday a snowy sleet had beaten at the window; this morning it was winter no longer which tapped there, but spring which beckoned. The tree-tops were already in bud, and far down below a mist of young green enveloped the bushes, and here and there an almond was in its full pink livery. The sight of it all, the smell of it, the sense of it got between his page and his brain, drawing him away, as on some great serene tide from the rocks and shallows of his work, into the shining sea of spring. It flowed over him, like the fresh tide that sets the stranded seaweeds waving, and pours into the rock-pools, brimming them with the life of its fresh saltness. There was no resisting it, it swept away with an effortless wash the tentacles of his brain that still tried to cling to his work, swishing and foaming through them, and easily detaching them.

There had been promise of this change last night, when he dined at Dora Winton's flat, and she had said that she would call for him round about twelve o'clock this morning with a view to taking him off to Kew Gardens. They might drive round Richmond Park first, stroll by the Penn Ponds, lunch at some abominable inn, and

spend an hour or two in green places without definite plan except that one fixed point of Kew Gardens and the daffodils. She meant to do that, anyhow, if the morning fulfilled the promise of the night, and she would just call at his flat, send a message up to say she was there, and he would do precisely as he pleased. It was open to him without the smallest hesitation, to send down a negative growl by the lift-boy, and she would spend a rustic day by herself with perfect content, or possibly pick up somebody else. It would be jolly if he came, it would really be equally jolly—was that rude?—if he didn't.

He had intended that she should be jolly alone, but now as the hour approached when he might expect her neutral advent, the warm breath of the breeze began to weave wonderful tapestries in his mind, which, in this torrent of spring that poured in at his windows, was violently reacting from the atmosphere of the play in which he had been immersed. It was heavy with cynical and subtle intrigue: it was rather stifling, and the breeze rippling his pages, seemed to turn them over with airy contempt, as if saying, "What is all this indoor rubbish? Come out!" Then, too, a violent interest stirred in him as to what Dora would be like in the country under the spell of spring; what new aspect would she show of herself. Would she bring her own atmosphere with her, which fitted her so perfectly, and just watch the spell at work, from her warm fragrant sphere, looking at it as at some graceful frisking animal, or would the spell work on her, so that her mind, so curiously coloured, so exotically scented, so orchid-like —that was the word—would be transformed for an hour or two into a wild outdoor flower? That would

be an interesting study: he could not imagine her other than cultured and worldly and subtly-smiling, and yet how could she be immune to this medicine of the March wind, which purged the winter from the bones, and set the microbes of youth swarming in the blood and making there some heady ferment?

He had seen her almost daily since he had come up to town again, and the charm and enigma of her grew ever more elusive. He could not account for her nor analyse her; she contained an unknown term; she was like an inscription in some foreign language in which there occurred again and again a word whose significance was quite unknown to him. This unknown word pervaded for him the emanations from her mind, so that however simple and trivial was the topic of their talk, he could not wholly grasp her point of view. Certainly in type she appeared spectator rather than sharer in human emotions and affections, she was always a little aloof, critic rather than actor, approving sometimes, even enthusiastically approving, but with some unspoken reservation in that slightly indulgent smile of hers, as if her amusement was not wholly at the humour or wit which all could appreciate but at something in it diverting to her alone. . . .

Apart from this mysterious flavouring which, ever so faintly, pervaded her, and which sometimes repelled but more often intrigued him, he was immensely and increasingly attracted by all that he grew familiar with, and that spice of the mysterious kept it piquant and surprising. It was evident that she intended to attract him: her attention was always alert when he was with her: she was immensely interested in his work, candid and appreciative and critical, and she presented her mind

to him, in full dress, so to speak, with all the embellishments and decorations that naturally belonged to it. That was so important: her mind did not pose or attitudinize, its graceful subtle movements were all instinctive. . . . But was that mysterious spice of hers a natural product of her mind, or was it ever so subtly introduced as a whet to his curiosity? Usually it seemed an authentic part of her, occasionally he wondered whether it was a baited hook. But what on earth did she want to bait hooks for? He was as certain as he was of anything in the world that she was not one atom in love with him.

But sometimes (and this morning particularly he did so) he wondered if he was falling in love with her. Mentally he immensely admired her, physically she had for him precisely that elusive charm which her mind had, but the two stood apart and were not fused into one. He listened and delighted in her subtlety or her cynicism: he looked for the light to shine somewhere deep in those sapphire-coloured eyes, which seemed so nearly black by candlelight, and which shifted and flitted so nimbly and perceptively, and imagined them looking straight and steadfastly into his. But if he was in love with her, surely he would see her in unity as an indivisible adorable whole, voice and eyes and mind and body; mysterious perhaps still, but to be taken in with one snap of the perceptions. If they went out together (he was still in two minds whether he would go or not) he would ask her about that point in the psychology of love. It bore on the play he was writing too. In fact, everything bore on the play he was writing. Really he did not know whether his play or she attracted him most, and the fact that there was any doubt about

that was a fair criterion as to her reality for him.

There came a muffled creaking from the lift on the landing outside his door, and the lift-man entered with the news that Mrs. Winton in her motor was waiting in the street below for his message. Rex had rechristened him Oliver; he was the living image of him; it would be a surprise for the original Oliver, if ever he came to see Rex, to find himself wafted upwards by himself. Rex put down the pen he still held, though the ink on it was dry.

"What am I to do, Oliver?" he said. "Am I to go out and look at the pretty flowers or do my work?"

Pseudo-Oliver grinned. Rex had a perfectly charming manner with servants. "I should do just what you thought you would like best, sir," he said.

Oliver had left the door open. A warm freshet of the breeze poured in from the window intoxicatingly vernal, and Rex clutched wildly at his papers. That settled it.

"Oliver, you're a hedonist," he said. "Tell Mrs. Winton I'll be down in a moment, and shut the door. Oh, shut the door!" he shouted as the pages ballooned in the air.

He set things straight again but for one leaf that had fluttered underneath the sofa. It would stay there nicely out of the draught till he returned, and with coat and cap on his arm, he ran downstairs, not waiting for the return of the lift. There she sat in her open car with Oliver still in the act of delivering his message, and Rex sprang in.

"Couldn't resist it," he said. "The hounds of spring you know, but I hope the mother of months isn't going to fill the shadows and windy places with—with ripple of rain. Thank you, yes, I'm in."

The chauffeur turned a respectful ear to her directions.

"Oh, anywhere," she said. "Richmond Park or Kew. Whichever comes first."

Rex drew a long breath: he was really unconscious of her as yet. That pleased and displeased her: she loved his mood, but liked to be included in it.

"It went to my head," he remarked. "I think I'm tipsy."

"You must be. Else you'd have noticed that your Oliver has taken a situation as lift-boy in order to be near you. I think that's too touching."

Rex hastily put on his cap in order to take it off again to a passing acquaintance.

"Isn't it?" he said. "Have you seen Oliver, by the way? The real one, I mean, not his wraith?"

"Yes. I dined there two nights ago. But I rather thought it was Oliver's wraith who sat next me. He wasn't very real."

"Did he ask after me?" said Rex.

"I don't think he did."

"What a brute! No, I think it's I who am the brute. But I must do something, if he won't. Perhaps Oliver is the lift-boy and the other one the wraith. . . . Oh, how becoming the warm wind is. Every one looks shrivelled up and dried when it's in the east, like—like kippers."

He turned to her, conscious of her at last.

"You look awfully spring-like, Dora," he said. "You look like Primavera in the Botticelli picture, quite entrancing and rather silly. She's got a nice young man too (that's me) who is picking her an orange. Shall we find an orange in Richmond Park? We might buy one, and put it in a tree, and then I'll pick it for you. Do be serious, and not talk such rot."

"I won't if you'll let me speak. At present I've been listening to gibberings."

"Quite true. Let's be calm. O-oh, almond blossom. I wish I lived in one of those discreet little houses. One could come and smoke a pipe on Hammersmith Bridge, and see the boat race. They look rather wicked those little houses: their blinds are always half pulled down, which makes them appear as if they were winking at you. I expect they dine out with each other and have orgies, and pretend they haven't in the morning. There! That blind gave a hiccup. . . . Oh, for heaven's sake stop me."

She laughed.

"That would be no use," she said. "If you bottle up anyone who, like you, is fizzing with vernal idiocy, he only explodes. Fizz away, Rex: get rid of the bubble, don't burst."

"What should I do if I did? Change hats with your chauffeur, I suppose. Is that why people always change hats on Bank Holiday, because they've been bottled up so long? I've been bottled up, too, over my play. I think I should have burst if I had not come out. Oh, by the way, both the other ones have been returned with thanks. I minded dreadfully about it at breakfast-time, but now I don't care one atom."

They had emerged from the rows of little wicked villas on to Barnes Common. Something of the spring was beginning to simmer in her caught directly from the day, or by some infection from Rex. She pointed to the open spaces dotted with gorse-bushes.

"Oh, Rex, the shadows of white clouds bowling over the grass! They are blue from the reflected sky. Wouldn't it be nice to be one of those shadows, blown along over the earth on a spring day. . . ."

Rex followed her pointing hand, and looked back again

at her. Was it a new aspect that she presented of herself? Was the spell working in her too? It suddenly struck him that she was like one of those blue transparent islands of shadows, with their dimnesses and fleetness, and their outlines melting into sunshine.

"You would make a delightful one," he said. "I almost believe you are one."

He saw a sparkle light itself in her eye, a flush ever so faint came to her face. Then she seemed to dismiss whatever unspoken thought caused that, and gave him her usual lightness and laughter.

"I'm not," she said. "I refuse to be a shadow. How rude you are, Rex: you imply that I get between you and the sun."

"No, I wasn't rude," said Rex.

"My dear, of course you weren't. Now those two plays which have been returned: I am sorry. I was rather afraid about *Adam and Eve*, you know. People don't want to be shown what they're like, rather mean, rather sensual, rather unprincipled, rather shabby below their smartness. There's wormwood at the bottom of your cup, you know, and people want a sticky sediment of sugar which they can eat with their spoons as they drive home and think it over. What are you going to do?"

"Send them out again when I've got time," said Rex. "I'm much too busy on the new one just at present."

"How is it going?"

"Rather well. Oh, I wanted to ask you something psychological. Is it possible for a man to be tremendously attracted by a woman mentally and also physically and yet not be in love with her? If so, why?"

She hesitated one second, and again the light glowed in her eyes.

"Yes, quite easily," she said. "The reason is that he is only attracted to her in sections. Until they are all fused into one he's not in love with her. Why do you ask?"

"Because I want it to come in my play just like that. And what makes him fuse?"

"Oh, anything, if he has got as far as that. The way she blows her nose or eats her cutlet. Anything will do for the last straw, if there are all those straws there already."

"Gracious! Then there's some good in a woman having a cold in her head," said Rex. "The happiness of her life may depend on it."

"Not at all," said she. "It's the way she blows her nose. He will think, if that is to be the last straw, that she blows her nose as nose was never blown before. She needn't have a cold at all. You're terribly inaccurate for an observer of human nature."

"I know. Let's observe inhuman nature instead."

She looked sideways at him.

"Do you mean trees and deer or yourself? You're quite inhuman."

"I'm nothing of the sort," said he. "I'm overflowing with the milk of human kindness. I'm dripping. Why do you call me inhuman?"

"Because you wouldn't care if every one in the world was dead, provided only that you could go on writing plays."

"Oh, what a libel! I should care immensely. If every one in the world was dead there would be nobody to act my plays or go to see them. I should be wretched. Don't suggest such tragic possibilities. . . . Oh me! Look at the plantations beginning to be purple with the spring. That's what I meant by inhuman. Just for a

change I wasn't thinking about myself. I believe you imagine I always am."

She laughed.

"My dear, I don't," she said. "I was just chaffing you. Besides, even if I wasn't, you are so right to concentrate on what you want. Most people don't even know what they want: it's the beginning of wisdom to know that. And even if they know it, they don't set about getting it. That's what I respect about you. You know precisely what you want, and are quite determined to get it."

"But supposing I don't?"

"You needn't be afraid. You'll go on till you do. You aren't an idealist, you see. You don't go for the infinite: you go for the large firm finite. . . . Let's get out and walk. We'll go across the grass and by the ponds and get picked up at the top of Richmond Hill. We will then devour a nauseating lunch in a small frowsy inn. And then we'll go to Kew, and this evening you shall dine with me. There's a large firm finite programme."

The West was beginning to flame below an arch of pale green sky when she set him down again at the door of his house. Oliver of the lift whirled him up to his rooms, and there was his play waiting for him, with the one strayed page to be fished out from below the sofa. So vivid to him was the situation in which, with Dora's endorsement of the point in psychology which he had referred to her, he had left his 'people' when he ran downstairs this morning, that they seemed impatiently to be waiting for his return, that he might record what they had to show him. There they were, the two of them with whom he was immediately concerned, the woman

seated in the chair beside the fire, the man somehow so like himself, adoring her in sections not yet fused into one. She knew that too : she was watching him, Rex thought, as she might watch the coming of dawn, quite confidently, and from very certainty, scarcely wishing to hurry the approaching illumination. She was taking it quite easily, chaffing him a little about his self-centredness. . . .

Rex had taken up his pen ; there was a sentence half-finished and he read the last few lines aloud to catch the staccato rhythm of her speech. Even as he paused there came to him that queer sensation that all this had happened before. Or was it that it was about to happen ? Did he remember something from the past, or did he look as through the magic of a crystal into the future ? Already he had sunk fathoms deep in his play, but here, as to a diver, there came some urgent signal from the surface and his mind rose from that twilight lucidity, and came like a bubble to the surface again into his room with its corners veiled in shadows, and one red beam of sunset shining through the trees in at his window, and kindling a lurid oblong of flame on the wall opposite.

It was in vain that he tried to submerge himself again ; the living world with a hundred memories and associations and anticipations, dim and vivid, relevant and inconsequent, foamed in on every side, carrying him this way and that in sudden eddies of distracted thought. He ran over his unfinished sentence, but instead of picking up the train of ideas that contained its completion, there started up before him the picture of his father's dead face, with its sour and satisfied smile, and his own indifferent but shrinking scrutiny of it. Then there came the image of Oliver anointing his sunburnt shoulder with something that smelt of violets and drawing a thread of

silk between his teeth. There was something characteristic and feminine about that, and he disliked it. But Oliver could be stubborn and masculine enough, too, and he disliked that. What business, anyhow, had Oliver got to come between him and his work like this. And there was his mother, listening to his reading of his play, looking troubled and uneasy, and when it was finished making absurd suggestions, which caused him tremors of impatience. He ought to write to her, but really there was nothing to say: she would care about the play he was engaged on now as little as that which he had read to her. . . .

Rex suddenly perceived what was happening. His mind was throwing out those smoke-screens of its impressions to conceal the manœuvres on which it was really engaged. Holding his breath and shutting his eyes, he plunged through them, and came to his real self, still driving down on this spring day to Richmond, walking across the Park, lunching at a narrow table, where Dora's hands and his so nearly met, and lingering by the hillock in Kew Gardens on which the daffodils were dancing. How spring had rioted within him: it was as if a peal of bells had sweetly clashed in his ears all day, till he was bemused with the infinite changes of their melody. She had felt it, too, it had caught and drawn her in its meshes, now fatigued with its languors, now vitalized into nonsense and laughter, but of all they had said and done, that moment, before they got out of the motor and walked, was alone quite distinct in this gleaming haze of vernal impressions. She had told him that he was inhuman, and that made rebellion in his blood: she had told him that the most trivial happening will fuse the sundered attractions of a woman into love, and he

felt himself holding the poles of some electric battery, on the switch of which a finger was now pressed, ready this moment or the next to send the current through him. . . .

It was no use attempting to take up his work again; that for the moment was no obscuring smoke-screen but rather from its very subject it gave a focussed clearness to the ferment which was transacting itself within him. The very words he had written as he read them over, took on the timbre of her voice, they were addressed to no puppet of his brain, but to himself. The moment of the melting and the fusing had not yet come, but the crucible and all that it contained was beginning to glow and its outline to quiver, even as the sun-baked air on the hot beaches at Roughton quivered into a mirage of shining pools. In that tremulous light all that he looked on took a new and wonderful aspect, so that once again as he pictured his father's dead face he felt a pang of pity and regret, and thinking of Oliver he saw only his devotion and affection, and thinking of his mother, he saw her great love throned infinitely high above this twilight of the earth.

He must really write to her to-morrow: though there was little to be told of himself, he could let this ecstasy of spring and its tumults stream out to her. As for Oliver and Oliver's aloof pride in not making any sign, that could be easily remedied by doing so himself. In this expansion and enlargement that the spring had wrought in him, Rex warmed to him and wanted him; their estrangement had gone too far already, and it must somehow be put right. . . . An eager question and answer at the telephone brought Oliver's promise to call for him to-morrow night and dine with him. They could settle where when he came. All these things for one flash

of perception were absolutely true to him, and clearly seen.

The flash flickered and vanished again: somewhere outside a slow-striking clock told the hour, and recalled him to the immediate need of the moment, which was to dress and go out to his dinner. It had been left undetermined as to whether they should go to a play; a rather early dinner would allow them to ascertain for certain, when they had dined, whether they wanted to. "You often can't tell," she had said, "whether you want to do a thing until the moment comes for taking or leaving it. If we settle not to go now, we may get bored with each other about half-past eight." That seemed a very sound principle, but Rex in this instance felt that there was not the slightest chance of their going anywhere. They would dine, they would sit on for a little, and then move to the small room where he used to work when he inhabited the flat. She used that constantly now instead of the more formal drawing-room, for she said that Rex had trained it and broken it in. Hitherto it had been quite undomestic, like the waiting-room at a station. They would sit there, and then sometime in the evening . . .

She gave him no more than her flitting glance as he entered unannounced, and looked back again at her evening paper.

"We shall have to hurry," she said. "I want to see the new Harrington play. It came out last night, and was a dead failure. So it's probably well worth seeing."

Rex took the cocktail which was waiting for him on the chimney-piece.

"Right-o!" he said, and sipped it, turning his face to the fire. Then he heard the paper rustle, and her soft

purr of a laugh, as she laid her hand on his shoulder.

"Oh, Rex, I caught you there!" she said. "You really believed for a moment that I wanted to go to this foolish play. Your back looked crosser than anything I have ever seen."

He turned quickly.

"You perfect brute," he said.

"I never thought you would believe me. Did you really imagine I intended to wind up our day in two stuffy stalls? That would undo, as doctors say, when one insists on going out in the evening after spending the day in bed drinking cough-mixture, all the good that the medicine had done. Of course we're not going out. We shall sit and talk nonsense till we fall asleep from spring-languor, and then we'll talk in our sleep. I should like to hear you talk in your sleep. You would say such pungent things about the people who love you. Come in to dinner: being out all day invariably takes away my appetite, but after I have eaten a little I become ravenous."

"Oh, that's so like you," said he. "You grossly insult me——"

"Never! It was true. You did believe I meant to go out."

"I wasn't referring to that," said he. "And I shouldn't if I were you: it does you no credit. What was so like you was telling me I abused those who loved me when I talked in my sleep, and then instantly changing the subject before I had time to protest."

"Protest now then!" said she.

"Too late. Protestation ought to come in the heat of the moment. What's that gown you're wearing? I've never seen it."

"My dear, you never see any gown I'm wearing,"

said she. "I've tried you with a wonderful variety of them, and they produce no impression whatever on your mind. You're gown-blind, or, if you like it better, dress-proof. Most men are. They generally say one looks best in black. I suppose that's because they can't wear anything else themselves."

"I could wear yellow and magenta if I wished to," said Rex.

"Ah, do! And walk in Hyde Park. The Rambler would say you were seen chatting to friends in the Park and looking lovely. I am getting hungry. I thought I should about half-way through dinner. Oh, what a nice day I have had, thank you, Rex. I believe you had your doubts of me, and thought I should bring the town into the country."

"And what made you think that?"

"I take note that you don't deny it. Why, you made me think it. You looked at me from time to time to see if I was getting on well with the country, as one looks at somebody one has just introduced to a friend. But I didn't take the town into the country, did I? I seem to myself to have done just the opposite, and brought the country back with me into the town."

"Bring what you like," said he, "as long as you bring it yourself."

Her eyes rested for a moment on the servant and then on him. Did she mean to remind him that they were not alone? She laughed.

"That sounds like a compliment," she said. "I ought to sweep you a curtsy—isn't that what women used to do? No, I think they simpered. Let me off the simper, Rex: I haven't practised."

But underneath these flippancies of friendliness, the

moment which Rex knew was approaching drew ever nearer. Some inward tumult and joyous confusion bewilderingly possessed him, the minutes that passed were like some procession that heralded the coming of a queen. Soon she would be here : her advent had already set the bells ringing. Before long Dora rose, and as she passed him on the way to the door, he caught a glance of hers which matched his own : the two as they met seemed to quiver into flame. He was welcome, he was expected.

" The little room, Rex," she said. " Bring the cigarettes with you."

She was standing by the fireplace when he entered, and with a gesture that was common with her, she raised her hand to her head, lightly patting the hair above her ear, and her short sleeve slid back to her shoulder as she lifted her arm, leaving it bare. And though he had seen her do just that many times before, admiring the grace of that momentary pose, he felt he knew that he had never seen the whole of it, nor indeed had ever beheld her at all until then. All his consciousness, at that fusing spark, shot up in a flame of desire.

She turned her head to him, and her glance, jewel-blue, met his. Her eyes smiled at him and her mouth, while her hand dropped slowly from her head. It was not quite passive : it seemed blown on some breeze towards him, beckoning.

" Well, Rex ? " she said.

He flung both arms round her, prisoning hers, and kissed her. For one long moment she yielded herself, nestling into him, with shut eyes and clinging mouth.

" Ah, you adorable, you adorable ! " he said. " You told me what would happen, you witch, you wonder ! "

Still she clung to him, then with a little sigh she lifted

her head, holding it back and away from him, breathing quickly.

"Let me go at once, Rex," she said. "Don't say another word: just let me go."

Her voice was absolutely calm; and she made no effort whatever to free herself. His arms tightened round her.

"That's quite impossible," he said. "And you know it as well as I do."

She did not raise her voice, and she still stood perfectly limp, with head bent far back from him. Her eyes were half-closed, her mouth drooped. Close to her by the side of the fireplace, was the bell.

"Let me go at once," she said, "or I shall ring. I really mean it. I hope you won't force me to do that, I should hate it."

There was no doubting her purpose, for her hand was searching the wall. His arms dropped, and quite quietly she took a step away from him.

"Sit down, Rex," she said.

He took the chair to which she pointed, while she, turning away from him, leant her elbow on the mantelpiece. A moment before every leaping pulse and exultant nerve in his body had told him that she was his. She had beckoned to him, she had yielded herself to him. . . . Or had that blaze of passion which had enveloped him from head to foot blinded him to all else but its own existence and his desire? It must be so: nothing else could account for what had happened next.

"I ask your forgiveness, Dora," he said. "I—I entirely misunderstood you. You have every right to be furious with me. . . . I was a cad. Shall I go?"

She moved, and stood facing him, and he saw that her

eyes were bright, but not with anger, and that her mouth smiled in a sort of rich content.

"No, you haven't misunderstood me," she said, "and there's nothing to beg my forgiveness for. And you weren't a cad. Only, Rex, you haven't understood quite enough. Shall I explain?"

He tried to answer, but no word came. He noticed that just above her elbows was a red mark showing where his arms had pressed her.

"I think you ought to understand," she said, "but as you clearly don't, I will tell you."

She paused, and then came soft purring words.

"You were quite adorable, Rex," she said. "I meant and intended you to do just what you have done. You did it quite beautifully."

She leaned forward in her chair towards him.

"Ah, why isn't there some anti-memory system which makes one forget, instead of helping one to remember?" she said. "I would go through a great deal to forget that moment when you took hold of me with such delicious violence, so that I could experience it again in all its freshness and vitality. There's nothing so divine as that first blaze of a boy's love. He becomes a god just for that moment. But then he becomes an animal again, and I've no use for that."

Rex turned to the fire, and held out his hands to the flame. Something within him had gone dead-cold, and it chilled him to the finger-tips.

"You . . . you meant me to do that?" he said.

"Of course I did. You were splendid, you were superb. And now it's over. Just that blaze!"

Her words falling softly as a summer shower soaked into him.

"Are you a fiend?" he asked.

"I don't think so. I only try to get what I want, just as you do, quite regardless of anybody else's feelings. There are plenty of women like me, just as there are plenty of men like you. I'm a little more honest than most women, though. They usually lead a man on, until—until he boils over, and then they pretend to be shocked. They're not shocked really: it's what they've been playing for. They adore it: all women adore being adored. Of course there are others, shocking creatures, who break commandments. Tut, tut! . . I never know how you should pronounce that."

There was something beginning to get hot below the cold that had gripped him.

"So I've just been providing entertainment for you," he said.

She looked at him with that smile which he had often seen, and which had always puzzled him. There had always been some secret behind it, which now had solved itself.

"Ah, much more than entertainment," she said. "It was wonderful: it was perfect. I quite acknowledge that you're feeling rotten just now, and I should be sorry for that, if I could only stop enjoying myself. You see, if you didn't care for me, you wouldn't have given me that wonderful moment, and the fact of your caring makes you suffer."

"I see you've thought it all out," said he. "I suppose you have had plenty of experience in these entertainments. Leonard Hobhouse now: I suppose he was one of your entertainers."

"Ah, you've guessed that," said she. "You are very clever, Rex."

"I could find a nastier word for you," said he.

"What a pity you said that! It is merely rude."

"You must teach me manners and morals," he said.

"You wouldn't listen to anything I said about either just now. You are being very unreasonable. I have given you a very good time for several months; you seem to forget that. I don't grudge it to you in the least, for you've paid me back handsomely. . . . I don't know if in your outburst—well, your outburst of affection just now, you implied that you wanted me to marry you or be your mistress, but I don't intend to do either."

Rex looked her straight in the face. For a moment his anger stood away from him and the consciousness of the diabolical trick which had been played on him.

"I owe you an answer to that," he said, "but I can't give you a definite one."

She laughed that cooing, purring laugh of content.

"Ah, you needn't trouble," she said. "I see that it might embarrass you to explain."

"You mustn't mock me till you've heard my answer," he said. "It is this. I didn't look forward at all: I made no plans. I was only conscious of the fact that I loved you. You meant me to love you, you've told me so yourself, and you kept smiling and beckoning to me, until you got me. And then you proved yourself a swindler as well. That was a pretty trick, oh, damned pretty! Don't you agree?" He saw with a sudden glee that she winced at that. But only for a moment did she smart under it, and when she spoke her voice was untroubled and velvet-soft.

"Your mode of life makes me wonder whether you agree with yourself," said she. "Look at yourself: look at the people who have given you love with both hands. Your mother and Oliver, to take the first two that occur

to me. You have taken all they have given you, and you, in your soul, have given them nothing in return."

"Never mind them," said he. "What harm have I done to you?"

"Ah, that wonderful poem of Browning's! You reverse the sexes, I see, and turn yourself into 'The Light Woman.' You've done me no harm. You've given me some very pleasant hours. I've done the same to you."

Rex got up.

"I must thank you then for many pleasant evenings," he said. "This one, as far as I am concerned, is over."

"Perhaps that is wise. Now I've one more thing to say, which I don't want you to answer now. I am quite willing to be friends, Rex. If I don't see you, I shall miss you, and I believe you'll find that you will miss me. Whenever you do, suggest yourself."

He went to the door.

"Good night, Rex," she said, and he closed it behind him.

Chapter XII

FOR some reason Rex wanted him again, and all day, Oliver, though wondering what the reason was, knew that, as far as he was concerned, the nature of the reason did not matter at all. There had been the clear stipulation between them, made on that ghastly night at Dora Winton's flat when the break between them took place, that Rex would call him when he wanted him, and that till he called him he should not be bothered with him. There might be any amount of reasons for his wanting him: Rex might need help of some kind: it was idle to conjecture what the reason might be. But best of all would it be if he just wanted him.

As his steps quickened on his way to Knightsbridge, he allowed himself to realize how much he had missed Rex. No one could be thornier or more rasping than he, but that was part of him, to be swallowed, regretfully and with a wry face, but swallowed. Rex was just as hard on himself as on anyone else, and misjudged himself completely as he had done on that night when the rupture came, owning with a sort of conscious savagery, that he only took from friends and lovers, and never gave. That candid brutality had been sufficient to drive Oliver away, till the definite news came that he was wanted again, but he thought he ought to have seen that Rex existed for himself in compartments. One drawer contained extremely disagreeable things, but there were other drawers. When one was open, the others were firmly shut, and he would not allow that there was anything presentable in them. By that one drawer, so firmly opened before him, Oliver had allowed himself to judge Rex, but he knew, now that Rex had beckoned again, that he had stifled his own knowledge of him, just because he turned the key on the rest.

Oliver whisked all these introspective reflections out of his mind as he reached the door. What was the use of tittle-tattling to himself about what things that were past and probably misunderstood. What lay before him was absolutely simple. He had the sense of homecoming to be on his way to see his friend again, and all that lay behind must be swallowed up in that. As likely as not, Rex would have entirely forgotten that nightmarish conversation, so let it be a nightmare. . . .

He was whirled upstairs by the lift-man, whom he saw with an amused surprise to be his own double : that was rather a godsend, for it would make an instant and agree-

able opening in this meeting with Rex, and he bounced into his room.

"Rex, how jolly!" he cried. "But why didn't you tell me I had been taken on here as lift-man—I say, Rex——"

Rex was sitting at a table by the window, his head on one hand, his pen busily engaged in the other. He looked up frowning at the interruption.

"Oliver?" he said. "What on earth brings you here?"

He remembered for the first time that day his invitation of the evening before.

"Good Lord, I quite forgot," he said. "Of course I asked you last night."

He looked at him with eyes heavy and vacant: he seemed to Oliver to be extraordinarily far away.

"What's the matter, Rex?" he said. "Anything wrong? Perhaps you don't want me."

Rex appeared to come out of some tunnel, blinking at the light.

"No, don't go," he said, and turned to put his pen back in its tray, and blot his page. Then he faced round again, and his eyes in which before there had barely been recognition, grew alive and near again.

"Go? Certainly you shan't go," he said. "Why, I believe it's exactly you I want. Rotten of me to forget, but I've been so plunged in my play and—and other things all day and most of last night, that it went clean out of my head. I say, I am glad to see you. Have a drink? No? Well, I will."

Oliver perched himself on the arm of Rex's chair.

"Rex, you're in trouble," he said. "Won't it be a good thing to tell me about it?"

"Yes, I'll tell you," he said, "but not now. I couldn't tell you now. You're a stranger at present."

"I know: rotten of me," said Oliver.

"Not a bit. Now for God's sake, take me out of this hell I've been in. Then we'll go back there, hand in hand. That'll be jolly. But I'm going to have a quantity of dinner first."

He finished his drink and got up.

"Oliver, you old beast," he said. "I am glad to see you. Let's eat and drink, for to-morrow we're damned."

They were seated presently in a neighbouring restaurant and question and answer zigzagged about as they brought each other up to date in their doings. There was not very much to say: Oliver had been at his coaching all day, and had been going out a good deal in the evening, amusing himself very tolerably, dancing, dining, just that. Rex during the same period had been a few weeks in town, ever so busy over the third play, which no doubt when finished would pursue the same firm career of rejections as its predecessors. Previous to that, he had been at Roughton with his mother. . . .

"I went there after my father's death," he said, "and stayed there three weeks, or four, was it? I meant to live there, but after a while it didn't prove a great success. So at least my mother thought."

Oliver trod carefully here. Was Rex's trouble, about which he did not yet wish to speak, connected with her?

"How is she?" he asked.

"Quite well. I say, when I told you that my mother didn't think it a success, that was one of those true lies which are quite false. I was glum and sulky and made myself odious. So she put it that naturally I wanted more amusement and interest than she could give me,—her fault,—that's how she put it—and she gave me a bigger allowance than I'd had before, and told me to come

back to town. Before that—we're still going backwards—I was at Mrs. Winton's flat, which she'd lent me. My father found me there one day when he came unexpectedly up to London, and we had a frightful row. Lord, what a long time ago ! "

" Have you seen her lately ? " asked Oliver.

Rex paused.

" Yes, I spent the day with her yesterday," he said, " and dined with her in the evening. Let's have coffee and then go back. Coffee, waiter, and the bill. . . . Or do you want to go to some show ? "

Oliver felt he knew who was concerned in Rex's trouble : of the nature of it he had no idea. All that he had of sympathy and affection was on tap : Rex had only to turn it on.

" No, I want to come back with you," he said.

" It's up to you. I'm quite willing to go to a play or a hall."

Oliver got up.

" I should hate it," he said. " I'm coming back with you."

Rex laughed.

" You'll have a cheerful evening," he said.

They established themselves in Rex's room. He opened the window and shut it again.

" I don't know if it's hot or cold," he said. " Do you prefer to be chilly or fuggy ? "

" Fuggy, any day," said Oliver.

" Right."

Rex threw himself into a big chair.

" I wonder if you remember a day at Roughton," he said, " the first you were there, when we paddled across

the estuary. And we bathed, and the sea washed all the devils out of me."

"I remember all the days at Roughton," said Oliver.

"Well, I want you to try to feel towards me as you did then, because I'm a mass of devils. . . . So here goes. It's about Dora Winton and me. You told me once that she lent me her flat because she was in love with me. My father—that was the row I had with him—suggested that she was my mistress. He said it was even worse of me to live on her if she wasn't. He went away in a towering rage, disinherited me, had just time to tell my mother all about it, with suitable comments, and then died. That was a good day for his last, wasn't it?"

"Oh, Rex, how wretched!" said Oliver. "I am sorry."

"Thanks, but shut up. Besides, who knows? My father may feel delighted about it now. He probably thinks I've had a good lesson. Perhaps you will, too."

Oliver looked at him.

"I'm back at Roughton," he said, "swimming with you. You might as well say I would be pleased if a shark gave you a good lesson, by biting your leg off."

"Well, that idea of yours and my father's that she was in love with me was so wide of the mark that I could laugh," said Rex. "Nothing was further from her thoughts. She wanted me to fall in love with her, and you'd never guess why. Wasn't there a Roman emperor who used to eat a dish made of nightingales' tongues? I'm glad I thought of that: that's just like her. The nightingale's tongue, the thing that made music, was just a tit-bit to be tasted and done with. I wonder if the Roman emperor just bit it and then spat it out. I expect so: that's she, anyway."

Rex spoke quite quietly.

"She wanted me to fall in love with her," he said, "and worked away till she succeeded. We spent a spring day yesterday in Kew and Richmond: she suggested that, and I feel sure it was just another device to work me up. She made herself quite enchanting. I told her of a situation in my play, where a man was tremendously attracted by a woman, both mentally and physically, and yet was not in love with her. She told me that if he had got as far as that, a moment of fusion would come, and he would be in love with her. But she knew as well as I that I was not really talking of my play, but of myself and her. One does that sometimes, if the discussion concerns one very intimately: you and I have done that. We've said 'a fellow might,' or 'a fellow wouldn't.'"

"I know," said Oliver.

"Well, there was the situation. She knew I admired her extremely, her eyes, her wit, her hands, her intelligence, every single thing about her, physically and mentally, and she told me, under talk of my play, that the fusion would come, which would melt everything together into an adoration of her. Wonderfully good psychology: she was perfectly right. And all the time she didn't care two straws for me, but she wanted just one moment, which would make a sucked orange of me, rind to be thrown away."

Rex got out of his chair: his voice had risen, and he tried to pour himself out a drink. The decanter shook in his hand, half the spirits were spilled on the tray, the rest he drank off undiluted.

"She got what she wanted," he said. "There she was standing by the chimney-piece in the sitting-room when I followed her, and she just patted her hair and she smiled, and said, 'Well, Rex?' At that moment

I absolutely worshipped her, and I knew, I tell you, I knew from that smile, and that ' Well, Rex ? ' that she wanted me. Not a bit of it. I threw my arms round her and kissed her, and she let me. That was what she wanted of me, that and nothing more : ' the first blaze of a boy's love,' she called it, afterwards. Next moment she told me to let her go. And then she explained. She said she wasn't angry with me. Wasn't that kind, when she'd asked and schemed for it ? But that was all she wanted. She had no more use for me. What do you say to that ? "

Oliver was silent a moment.

" And you're sure you weren't only just keen on her, just wanted her ? " he asked.

" Yes, quite sure. That wouldn't have done for her. She could get lots of fellows just to want her like that, and then decline with thanks. She wanted love, the real article. . . . And I know she got it. If I'd only wanted her in the ordinary way, just casually, I should only have felt that it had been the most awful sell, and I'd better try again, or try elsewhere. As it is, I hate her. Affection and desire can't turn to hate : they haven't got the force : they can but turn to dislike or indifference, which are negative. Only love turns to hate. That's what I've learned. Sounds like a fifth-rate novel, doesn't it ? But it's true."

Rex stood there like some wonderful Greek statue of god or athlete : never had be been so poised or alert for swiftness or violence.

" And that's not the worst," he said. " There's a great outer darkness where I am, and I could be so comfortable there, hugging myself with hate, but there's also a little flame of love somewhere which won't go out. It flickers and burns blue and whimpers, but I can't put it out."

Oliver jumped from his chair and took hold of Rex's elbows.

" Oh, Rex, tend it and care for it and shelter it from the darkness," he said. " It's damnation if it goes out."

" Who cares ? Yes, I care, because I want it to go out. As it is, it maddens me. I don't want to see the dark, and it makes me see the dark. I just want to be in the dark, and of the dark. I want to hold her close and kiss her and then strangle her. No, I think it would be wiser to strangle her first, and then hold her and kiss her. She might be sorry for what she had done, if she was still alive, and, good Lord, that might save her soul. That wouldn't do at all."

He shook off Oliver's hands.

" I wonder you don't see that," he said, " because you used to understand me extraordinarily well. But there's just a little more to tell you. She cooed and purred as she explained, and when I told her she'd done the most atrocious thing a woman could do, she said I was just as bad and worse. She said I took all the love I could find, from you, for instance, and my mother, and gave nothing. I wonder if you agree with that. Never mind, don't answer. And to crown all she said that she was quite willing to be friends with me still. She said she would miss me if I wouldn't see her, and believed that I should miss her. That didn't require an answer, and that's all. I say, there's a pool of whisky on the tray. Can't you help yourself without spilling a pint of it ? "

It seemed to Oliver that there was nothing whatever to be said. He racked his brain for anything that could possibly help, and then suddenly realized that it was no use to look in his brains for it : it must be, if it was anywhere, in his heart. No ingenuity or subtlety could be

more than the crackling of thorns. And then something stirred, and he spoke without thought or premeditation.

"I've always loved you, Rex," he said, "and you never understood it. And your mother always loved you, and you never understood that. So far Dora Winton was right. But now you've felt what love is like. You can't have three more different manifestations of love than that of a mother for a son, of a boy for a boy, as we were, and of a man for a woman. But with all their differences they're exactly the same thing."

Rex made some impatient exclamation.

"No, don't interrupt," said Oliver, "or you'll say something that will make me think, and I don't want to think. I just want to tell you what I know. The three are the same, and if you've felt it towards a woman, you'll understand what it is that your mother and I feel towards you. Whatever you do to us, however you behave to us, and you've often behaved pretty rottenly, you can't possibly affect it. And whatever Dora Winton has done to you, she can't, if you've had a moment's love for her, touch or spoil it. It's yours just because you've given it her. And I don't believe you can kill it yourself, for all your anger and hate. . . . This all sounds dam' noble: I didn't mean to preach."

He had looked steadily away from Rex as he spoke: now he turned.

"Rex!" he said.

That hard fire had died out of Rex's eyes.

"You're not preaching, Oliver," he said, "you're practising. Sorry for being neat, but I've been doing my play all day. . . . That's how they talk in plays. . . . I dare say what you tell me is true, in fact I believe it is, but it doesn't get to me. Still, thanks awfully. You

always were a brick, and I've always been a devil. And I am now. I don't suppose I shall ever be different. . . . Well, I've told you everything. I've raved myself hoarse, not my voice but me. Gad, I wish I was on the beach with you at Roughton."

"You may be to-morrow, if you'll ask me to go," said Oliver. "Best thing you could do probably."

"I couldn't. I couldn't be there: there isn't any beach at Roughton. What I meant was if only things could be as they were: you and me, as it was last summer. I wouldn't even mind my father nagging me. What did it feel like before this slut came along? A vampire, you know, a great blood-sucking bat: like an otter that takes one juicy bite out of a salmon's throat and licks its lips. Or what was that brute in Greek mythology? Oh yes, the Minotaur, which took a tribute of twelve young men and twelve maidens from Athens every year. I wonder if she gets through twelve every year. I wish I could draw: I'd draw a picture of her like that Watts in the Tate Gallery, with a boatful of young men approaching. Has she had a go at you, Oliver?"

"Oh, Rex, shut up," said Oliver. "What's the use?"

"I didn't mean it to be of any use. But that's all: dinner's over, and let's say grace."

"I wish you would go to Roughton and ask me to come with you," said Oliver.

"I simply couldn't. Besides, I'm going to work. I'm hurting: I'm aching damnably, and the best drug is work. And when I've worked myself dog-tired, every day, I shall sit down and hate. Work as a drug, and hate as a cure. . . . Are you coming to see me again? You'd better not: it won't do any good, and I shall only be using you!"

"Capital! You've got a use for me in that case."

Rex put his arm round his friend's shoulders.

"I say, I am grateful, Oliver," he said. "You know that, don't you? But just now you're such a devil of a long way off. I'm just a black rock far out in a sea of hate and damnation. But I see you waving from the shore."

Oliver thrust himself close to Rex.

"Don't make any mistake," he said. "I'm swimming out to you. I'll get to you in time."

Sometimes, in the days that followed, time seemed to stand still for Rex; a day would pass quickly over his work, but the evening, when his brain could do no more, would last, not so much for hours, as for eternity. It did not seem as if an hour or a minute passed slowly, but it remained for ever, not to be measured in terms of quantity, but in those of quality, and it was the timeless quality of infinite duration that these hours possessed. If he thought of himself and all the ache and bitterness and emptiness which he himself felt, he would often be surprised to find that the hours had moved quickly, but when, forgetting himself, he let his consciousness be focussed on the contemplation of Dora Winton, he went into another region altogether, where time was expunged by the intensity of his hate. The blackness was immeasurable: where no ray of light reaches, there is no computation possible of the extent of the dark. What ended these nightmares of infinity was always the same, the dim flickering of the little light which he had spoken of to Oliver. Often he hoped it had gone quite out, but even as he hugged himself on its disappearance it would faintly glimmer again. And dimly filmed in the darkness by it, there appeared three faces, his mother's,

Oliver's, and Dora Winton's. It was only figuratively that he saw this : there was no physical visual impression of any kind, but the experience, if put into words, had to be represented under some such imagery.

Then came days when the sense of a personal share in what had happened to him, stood away from his mind altogether, and he could look at it all as if it had occurred to somebody else, and regard it like some marvellous picture, or as some intensely vivid scene in a book or a play. When it presented itself thus, he studied it with the keenest intellectual interest : it was dramatically a gorgeous situation, and he licked his lips with the appreciation of it. But what on earth—there was the irritating thing—was the unravelment to be ? He could frame no solution for it at all. Was the little flame to grow, till it dispersed the darkness altogether, and flooded the last act with radiance ? That would be mere clap-trap, a sloshy sentimental concession to the desire for a happy ending. Or was the darkness to put out the little flame, and was all to be ended by some murderous or suicidal act ? That was a mere cutting of the Gordian knot, a confession on the part of the playwright that he could make nothing of it, and so must just end it. It was no use cudgelling his brains as to what would happen in real life, for what would happen in real life was precisely what Rex did not know.

Through these weeks the one thing that remained absolutely constant was Oliver's unwearied patience. At present it did not come near Rex so that he felt the warmth of it, he only saw that it was there. Sometimes he would try to reach it, much oftener it irritated him, for it seemed to supplement the little flame which he so much wished would go out. Oliver listened

to Rex's violent diatribes with unvarying good humour, he beguiled his most morose silences with imperturbable cheerfulness. He insisted on Rex coming out to dine with him : he told Rex that there was a small gathering at his mother's house, just eight, with bridge to follow, and when Rex said he would not come, Oliver would say, " Pity, isn't it ? You like bridge, and we shall be one short without you."

" But I'd sooner not come," said Rex.

" Then you must be good-natured, and sacrifice yourself," said Oliver. " You'll spoil it all, if you don't."

" Oh, all right then, but never again," said Rex.

There were situations which needed more patience. . . .

" I wish you wouldn't come here so often," said Rex one night. " I like working in the evening."

" Oh, but you've worked all day. You'll only write piffle if you sit at it too long."

"Well, I want to write piffle. Besides, I like being alone."

" But I don't like you to be alone," said Oliver. " Bad for you."

" But I don't want you. It's awfully good of you, I know. But there it is. You kept away from me long enough because I didn't say I wanted you. I should have thought your pride would keep you away now that I definitely tell you I don't."

" Rot : I haven't got any pride," said Oliver, " so what's the use of talking about it ? "

" But you bore me——" Rex began.

Then would come a surprising thing.

" Sorry, Oliver," he said. " You know perfectly well that you're the one fellow who makes things tolerable."

" Hurrah ! I vote we play picquet."

These were all little things which Oliver did for his friend: he did not attempt to do more, and there was his wisdom. The point, so it struck him, was continually to blow away the steam and smoke that came from this seething lake, to let in the air, to cool it with the fan of common things. Often a spurt of molten stuff scalded him, but nothing drove him from his place, and he saw that by degrees the volume of these bitter vapours was diminishing. What lay beneath, he did not know: love or hate or both. That would sometime declare itself when the dense ebullitions from it had subsided. He was like a nurse, he thought, whose business it was simply to keep a wound clean: sometimes the patient cursed him, wishing only to be left alone, sometimes his manipulation brought relief, and, very rarely, gratitude. Neither mattered in comparison with what he had to do. . . .

Often he wondered at himself for not caring how disagreeable Rex could be. Rex's tantrums rather pleased him than otherwise: it was as if his patient was showing the vitality implied by ill-temper, which is always welcome to nurses. And then he wondered at himself for wondering why he did not mind what Rex did or said, provided only that he got better. The reason was so clear, and so familiar to him: he loved Rex, and that was sufficient. Sex was an absolutely negligible factor: if he had been a girl, he knew he would have been Rex's wife or mistress or parlourmaid, or anything that Rex wanted of him, but the fact of being a man, and incapable of fulfilling these parts, made no difference whatever to the love that inspired him. Rex had fallen in love with a woman, and the very fact that she was a woman put Oliver more out of the reach of jealousy. Their old comradeship was untouched, and it was with the complete

self-surrender of love that Oliver adjusted himself to a relationship changed but not essentially altered. A few weeks ago there had been a rupture, it was true, for Rex had declared himself as one who took all and gave nothing. But what did it matter what Rex declared of himself? It could not affect the love of the giver; if it did, the giver would show himself to be one who counted his gifts, and thus was no lover.

All this was by the way, a theme for idle speculation to those who cared for self-analysis. All that mattered was ease and relief for Rex, and Oliver, with a lover's cunning, made secret consultations with another nurse. Rex had told him that his mother, as at present advised, expected him down at Roughton for Easter, and he had not yet told her that he meant to stop in London. Meantime, Mrs. Goodwin, vaguely uneasy about Rex's silence, broken occasionally by short stereotyped notes, had written to Oliver, asking if Rex was unwell or worried about anything. Oliver had answered that guardedly, but quite unguardedly he said how he longed to come to Roughton again: Easter would be a vacant time for him. His invitation there had immediately followed: a holiday would evidently do Rex good, and it would be charming of Oliver if he could spare time to come down and play about with him. Rex missed companionship when he was here in this empty place, and it made him so happy to have it. "Last summer, for instance, what a jolly time you two boys had. So do come down with him, and stop as long as you can. He was here alone with me, you know, after my husband's death, and the poor darling got so bored. He wouldn't admit it, and he wouldn't try to get you to come down, but he would have been much better if he had. So now we're conspirators,

aren't we ? Rex will love your being here, and so shall I."

Oliver made haste to accept, and as soon as that was done, to inform Rex of the fact. He was grumpy, of course, but it was not possible to carry out his threat and let Oliver go down there alone.

To be down at Roughton in his father's absence, and with the companionship of his mother and Oliver, had often seemed to Rex an ideal mode of existence, and here with exact precision was his ideal realized for him. He had got all that, a year ago, had represented itself to him as utterly enjoyable, and fate had not by one of her sinister jesuitical ingenuities taken him by the letter and marred the granting of the gift by giving him a cold in the head or a fortnight of gales and rain. Hot still sunshine of late April gilded the marshes, and warmed the sea and the sands, and long basking days on the Point succeeded one another. His play prospered, there was no one to worry or watch or criticize, he had unstinted all the materials for his heart's desire, and the leanness of them was like famine to him. He knew himself to be surrounded with all that he used so richly to enjoy, but the power of enjoyment had atrophied, he could not reach what lay spread round him. It was there, recognizable and authentic, but some encompassing barrier lay between him and it. Once that had been clouded and fogged with steam and molten vapours : now they had cleared, and that molten hate had turned to something crystal clear, rapidly cooling, but as it cooled, hardening into some sort of unbreakable glass which cut him off from what lay outside it, but allowed him to see the sweetness of it. He could scarcely call himself unhappy, he was merely insensitive to any touch, in some incapsulated

vacuum. Anger and irritation and suffering had all cleared off, or cooled into this hard clear casing, in which he sat emotionless, sometimes stroking these bright walls, and tapping them to assure himself of their solidity.

Just occasionally the desire to enjoy came to him, and it was then that this sense of famine gnawed at him. It was so one morning, as he and Oliver sat basking in the sun after their bathe, in a warm hollow of the dunes, and watched the tide recede across the beach.

"My brain's alive all right," he said, "and it finds it interesting to observe that I'm dead. It's just that, Oliver: I'm not exaggerating. Usually I don't mind; just now I long to be alive again. Am I real? Sometimes I think I'm not. Or is it everything else, you and my mother and the sea, that are ghosts? . . ."

He sat up clasping his knees in his arms.

"Oliver, it's awful," he broke out. "I'm in a glass cell and I see my mother and you moving about outside it, and there's love for me, any amount of it, if I could only reach it. And there's beauty and delight outside it, and I can't get at it. I'm sealed up. . . . I did love her, you know, and she mocked at my love; she just touched it with some poison and killed my capacity for loving. But my brain's frightfully alive, it works like a hive of bees, she couldn't kill that. Something about her, you know: I'll write something about her, and make it quite unmistakable, and you and Leonard and I will sit in a box and roar with laughter. She served Leonard just as she served me: by God, I'll write to him and tell him all about it. It might amuse him. Odd fellow he must be, for he's friends with her still. I've met him dining there. Probably he saw the web that had caught him was being spread for me. Spider, you

know: the female eats up the male among spiders, just as in human beings. That must have tickled him. He must have been amused to see that she had chosen me to entertain her next. Good Lord, how well I remember that evening: he said he was sorry for me, because all my troubles were in front of me. That's what he meant, of course. And she insisted that though he said he was sorry for me, he envied me. She meant the same."

Oliver felt vaguely cheered by this acuteness.

"Oh, you're all right," he said. "Not much fear about your being dead. Go on analysing."

Rex looked extraordinarily Faun-like. His black hair had crisped itself back in the heat to a tight thatch of curls, his splendid body, bronzed already by these days of basking and bathing, was bent to a bow, as he leaned forward with his chin on his knees, and of bronze was the lean fine oval of his chin, and his lips and half-closed eyes, heavily lidded, smiled with some saturnine amusement too self-centred to be cruel. It was enough that the sun was warm on his shoulders, and gave him a physical sense of content.

"Yes, analysis is the one thing I care about," he said. "That's my job, you see. Let's analyse ourselves, just we three in the house by the quay, whom any outsider would say were having such an idle jolly holiday. Let's get the microscope on us. There's my mother now. Do you know what she's done for me? She's given up her own maid, and looks after herself. She's dismissed the housemaid, and gets a charwoman in from the village while we're here. And I think she has sold an emerald brooch she used to wear. She's done that in order to increase my allowance. And—would you believe it?—she

absolutely loves the privations and inconveniences, because I get the benefit of them. But don't imagine I think that touching or lovely of her. I think it's awfully silly."

"Me next," remarked Oliver.

"I was just coming to you, but first I was going to say that I don't love her. I think it's the beauty of her character that bores me stiff. I dislike beauty of character because it mocks me. Then there's you. I never loved you for a single minute, Oliver. I always thought you a fool for being so fond of me. I used to let you be sentimental at school, because I scored. You were rich, and my father gave me a stingy allowance, and so I got a lot of good grub when we messed together. It was just the same at Cambridge: you were fearfully popular and every one made up to you, and I only had to whistle, and you came panting to be patted on the head. It's been just the same ever since, and more particularly now when I hate love. I hate you, I hate my mother. . . . Oh, for God's sake, do be hurt."

Oliver reached across Rex for his shirt.

"What for?" he said. "Just to please you?"

"I can't think of any other reason," said Rex.

"Well, just for once it's not good enough."

He steadied himself against Rex's knees, and drew his shirt over his head.

"Anything else to please," he said muffledly, "but I can't pretend to be hurt at such awful piffle. It isn't you, Rex. It's just your disease. You'll get better. We're going to make you better, and how about lunch? You've been talking blasphemy, but you've only been talking in your sleep."

Rex began rubbing the dry sand from his feet.

"Rather odd you should have said that," he observed.

" I remember once that charming woman Dora Winton said she would like to hear me talk in my sleep because I should say such pungent things about the people who love me. But I'm not asleep : I'm deadly wide awake."

" If I thought that I should be miserable," said Oliver. " But I know better."

" You're wrong. I'm as wide awake as I ever was."

" Possibly. But you've never been awake in your life, except for a minute or two occasionally."

" When, for instance ? "

" Whenever, for a moment, you've understood what love meant."

" O Lord, is this a tract ? " asked Rex impatiently.

" It's just whatever you like. But you know it's true. It wouldn't annoy you if you didn't."

" I've the sleeping sickness, then," said Rex. " There's no cure."

" Rot. There are hundreds. Pity, for instance, compassion . . . "

" Or lunch," said Rex.

Chapter XIII

THE shortening of the autumn days had begun to bring the crowd of workers and of drones back to London : spas and seaside resorts, Highlands and hydropathic establishments and country houses were rolling up their carpets and shuttering their windows, and the world in general was preparing to amuse itself indoors during November. Day by day the crowd for lunch and dinner at the restaurants was growing thicker, and the meeting of Parliament (opened in a thick fog) indicated that London was in full swing again.

Rex was lunching that day at the Ritz with some hospitable harpy whose notion of social success was to feed as many people as would consent to be fed. Her name was Mrs. Mint, which was very suitable and easy to remember because it was so closely associated with the idea of money, of which she consisted. Rex was still inhabiting Leonard Hobhouse's flat, for he had been kept in Rome until certain negotiations, which promised to be interminable, had been finished. Rex had written to him from time to time; their experiences with Mrs. Winton had been very similar, and a considerable discussion had taken place. Leonard anticipated that in Rex's case, as had happened in his own, a complete emotional indifference would succeed to his present virulence, and that her intellectual and physical charms would then reassert themselves. Rex, in fact, had received a letter from him only this morning.

"She's an extraordinary type," Leonard had written, "or rather an extraordinary specimen, for I never saw another example of the type, though she says that most women really are like her, only she is more honest. (Probably she said that to you: it struck me as a cliché.) But she's wrong: she doesn't do herself justice. She's a spiritual Sadist, of great intellectual and physical refinement, but with a passion for the torture and heart's blood of nice young men like you and me. . . .

"You're right about that evening we spent together with her. Though I didn't care one straw any longer about her, I was irritated because you were probably going to have such a marvellous time, as you were falling in love with her. . . . You've got a *flair* for analysis, evidently. . . . Write again soon, Rex, and don't waste your time and energy in hating anybody. Nobody's

worth hate or love either. Sometimes I envy you your savage youth: even at thirty-one (like me) one cools down, and sometimes I'm sorry for you for having to be so violent. Give my love to Oliver: he's not violent, he's like an extremely pleasant maiden-aunt. And tell me any news about our adored idol. Has she got anyone else on the hooks? Not yet, I expect, for she's a real Epicurean, and knows that the too frequent indulgence of an emotion blunts the pleasure of it. The other line is to indulge it so inordinately that you cease to care for it, and then you're tranquil and serene again. I'm very tranquil just now, but I must find a new pleasure soon. What do you suggest? . . ."

Rex groped his way through the fog, thinking over this letter, and envying the writer's sunny and immoral indifference. Immoral? Not exactly immoral, because that implied ranging yourself and taking a side. There was none of that in Leonard: he took no sides, he was absolutely neutral. He had a good brain and a sound body, and anything approaching a principle was to him a mere impediment to pleasurable existence. Yet while Rex envied that, he felt that he would not willingly part with his power of hatred. It had become part of him, he would have felt lost and adrift without it. . . . And here obscurely visible against the black-tinted orange of the fog, jutting out like a promontory into that stagnant sea, was the Ritz, and within was kind Mrs. Mint, swathed in pearls and dispersing cocktails. Her party occupied a round table in the centre of the restaurant, for Mrs. Mint liked seeing and being seen. In spite of the fog the room was full; by the door there was just one unoccupied table laid for two people.

Rex engaged himself with his neighbours and his lunch,

and when next he happened to look up, he saw that this table was now no longer vacant. Opposite him, in full face, there was sitting a young man of twenty-five or so, extremely good-looking in the chocolate-box style, who was probably an advertisement for collars and ties or cuffs, so immaculately perfect was he. He was leaning forward, elbows on the table, talking with eager earnestness to the woman who sat opposite him, of whom only a back view, and that much obscured by her cloak and big sable stole, appeared. The young man seemed intensely alert, his eyes never left his companion's face ; it was easy to see that she entranced and absorbed him, and in a flash Rex felt himself understanding exactly what he was feeling, and how he trembled on the verge of some great emotional discovery. . . . Then his companion raised her hand, and patted the hair on the side of her head, and in spite of the muffling cloak and collar, he recognized her and the precise situation. . . . How well and with what absolute exactitude he knew now the nature of the spell which was over her companion ! It wove itself for him again, giving him an exquisite moment. That lamp in the outer darkness, of which he had spoken to Oliver, flared bright, the smouldering spark shot up, and swallowed the blackness. Then it came flooding back again ; but just for that second he had stood outside those clear hard walls that environed him. Now once more they closed in, but anyhow there was one brilliant item of news for Leonard in answer to his letter. What other news there might be Rex did not know yet, but certainly there would be some. Presently, on his way out, he would pass close to her, and he would not go by without looking at her, and making her look at him. What would she do, and for that matter what

would he? He would tell Leonard about that, when he knew what there was to tell.

Mrs. Mint's party sat long at their table, for she had to see who was here that she knew, and find out from her guests who had the rare distinction of being unknown to her. All this took time, and Rex was beginning to seethe with impatience at the thought that possibly Dora Winton and her companion might leave before Mrs. Mint was satiated. In that case he was determined to make excuses, and hurry out after them. Just one good look he must have at her, and she at him. Who her companion was Rex felt no interest whatever: he was a young man just on the verge of falling in love with her, and would probably do it rather well.

At last Mrs. Mint rose, and Rex manœuvred himself into being the hindmost of her party. He came opposite Dora Winton's table, stood close to it, and wheeled round.

She looked up and saw him, and gave one startled exclamation. Then she smiled and held out her hand.

"Rex, my dear!" she said. "How nice to see you again! Have you missed me at last? That's charming of you. Sit down and talk a minute, before you join your party. Do you know——"

She stopped, her eyes resting for a moment on her companion, and then coming back to Rex. He had not taken her hand, and she let it drop again.

"No, I don't know him," he said. "But I should think he will be about ripe by this evening, won't he?"

Once before he had made her wince, now she shrank back from him, drawing her furs about her.

"Nice to meet again, Dora," he said. "May I ring up some time, as you suggested? About ten to-night, and ask how it goes?"

He turned, after giving her time to reply, and went out to rejoin his party. Mrs. Mint was eager to know who that good-looking woman was to whom he had spoken. . . .

The party broke up, and Rex went homewards, breathing the fog as if it had been some sunny flower-scented air. That encounter, with its few but really rather apposite words, had amazingly stimulated him. He had made himself infinitely more real to her in a few sentences, than the tidy little man who sat opposite her ; and the tidy little man certainly had his wits if not his collar dishevelled, for he sat wide-eyed and open-mouthed, like a trout pulled from the water. Rex had just spared one glance for him as he left their table, and there he was, just like that, irresistibly comic. All this must be told without embellishment—you could not, in fact, embellish such a perfect episode—to Leonard, by letter, and to Oliver that very evening, by word of mouth, for Oliver was to fetch him about eight, and they were to dine together. Oliver would surely see a marked improvement in his spirits : that would be nice for Oliver.

There were nearly five hours to spend before that, and he could spend them so that they would pass in just one deep breath of concentrated attention. He had written and rewritten the third of his plays, he had revised the second and first, and now there lay ready for his pen a great scene in the new play, the fourth of the rejected series. He had spent a week in planning it, he had soaked himself in the three characters who conducted it, and they would be waiting for him now, as so many others had done, to be transcribed. He had not lost one atom of faith in himself and his power to succeed, and though his failure to get anyone to produce his work was like a hard bitter rind, he would still bite through it, and find

the fruit within. . . . And indeed, to-day, that hard rind promised to peel itself off, for, a couple of nights ago, he had met the manager to whom he had submitted his third play, who had drawn him into a quiet corner, and spoken with evident interest of it.

Mr. Moysey was an agreeable little Hebrew, like a dachshund, with pince-nez and a large ruby stud, and patted Rex's shoulder and his own leg in a friendly manner. Rex wanted to whistle ' Jerusalem the Golden,' for Mr. Moysey looked so rich and so Semitic, but quenched the impulse. There was, of course, hesitation in his approval: the second act—did not Rex think so ?—wanted a little pulling together, and the third a little, well, pulling apart —for the sake of that coy young thing, the censor. He had promised to send his decision to-day, and Rex hastened his steps, as he approached his flat, and asked pseudo-Oliver who that young woman was who giggled with him on the doorstep. . . . It appeared that she had brought a packet for Rex . . . and there was his play. Such a polite note with it, typewritten and autographed: Mr. Moysey hoped that Mr. Goodwin would allow him to see any future work of his.

So there were the three plays in a drawer of his table again. Rex turned the key on them, and tried to read himself back into the mood in which he had left his work. But it was elusive and kept slipping from him: it was delicate and required light handling, and somehow his mind was red with violence and with disappointment, with the violence of his own crudity at the Ritz just now, with disappointment, arid and barren, for the rejection of his play. The rind had not been peeled off at all, it was stiff as the armour of a tortoise.

For the first time he seriously asked himself if there

was any use in this manufacture, industrious and honest, of what never found a purchaser, and his determination to make his opening with what he believed was good work began to waver. For a year and a half now he had toiled austerely and assiduously, endlessly observing and studying and experimenting, and the result was a drawerful of unnegotiable manuscript. And he was not alone in his belief in his power of success : Dora had often told him that, with his dramatic sense and the wit and neatness of his dialogue, he must ' get there ' if he continued to do his best. He would get there by good work ; he did not want, nor did she for him, to arrive at production with some trivial tinselly piece, all simpering prettiness or salacious riskiness, or sentimental slosh. It was she who had burnished and kept bright his determination. . . .

Reaction from all his steadfastness suddenly swirled round him and swept him off his feet. There she sat at the Ritz with her ripe little lover, and just because she had encouraged and inspired him, he would fling her encouragement away, and spit on her inspiration. All his mind was in violent and exasperated opposition to anything that came from her ; just because she was confident in his power to do good work, he would deliberately scheme and execute the tawdriest stuff that his wit and his ingenuity could devise. He would trample on his ambitions as a protest against her fostering of them : he would recant all his convictions because she shared them. He did not think to hurt her : his own passionate repudiation of her was the point, that, and some frenzy of desire to blaspheme against what had been intellectually sacred to him.

He bundled back into the drawer which contained the rejected plays the one on which he was now at work, and with a feeling of finality once more turned the key on them,

and began prowling up and down the room. His fresh work must be cheap and insincere from beginning to end, and the utmost of his skill must be employed in its execution. The title then, something catchy ; *Painted Ladies* was the sort of thing, or why not have a man called Bartholomew, and name the play *Bartholomew's Eve* ? Bartholomew then must be a star-part, some gay butterfly of a Bartholomew, who had much communing with painted ladies, but a heart of gold. There was no lack of star-actors, preferably Frank Bellingham, whom Bartholomew would fit like a glove. Then there must be a painted lady, and a sweet young girl from a convent, and an apparently model young man with a heart of the basest metal, and an impecunious Duchess who talked exclusively about rank, and Bartholomew's faithful manservant. And the painted lady might have a mother in the background, for whose support (unbeknownst, of course, to this widowed typist) she pursued her unedifying career. The base-metalled young man could not be popular, but he would have beautiful creases in his trousers and a lawn-tennis racket. . . . There was a very popular actor, not quite of the first magnitude, now in more than middle-life, who had preserved a youthful figure and practically had the monopoly of such parts : he had enacted young men with well-creased trousers and bad minds since he had been a boy himself ; no one else was so bad and beautiful. Rex must write just such a part as Lucas Goring was accustomed to perform : he knew he could give him some excellent lines. As for the painted lady, no one could touch Miss Audrey as a painted lady. . . .

Rex perceived that he was getting on too fast and too magnificently. He was casting all the stars in London for his constellation. Still, that was the way to set about

it. He must write a Frank Bellingham part, and a Lucas Goring part and a Venetia Audrey part, for those were telling, popular parts, types easily recognized, familiar, well-loved figures. As for the plot, it really was spontaneously generated when people like these began to cross each other's paths. Bartholomew who in the first act must be seen hurrying with his butterfly-net after the painted ladies—no, they must just as much hurry after him, as he after them, for he was such a dear—must meet the sweet young thing from the convent, and then of course he fell madly in love with her in Act II. She, just as inevitably, was a ward of the Duchess's, her niece in fact, daughter of the Duchess's sister whose lurid career and miserable death of heart-disease was never alluded to except with sighs and one surreptitious tear, for in spite of her rank the Duchess had a good heart. Agatha (the niece must be called Agatha) had been destined by her aunt for the horrid young man with the tennis racket, who was immensely rich, and who must either be a Baronet or an Honourable, since Lucas Goring never acted anything else, and the Duchess would not dream of allowing her ward and niece to marry so profligate a spendthrift as Bartholomew. So Bartholomew——

"Bartholomew must do a lot of noble things," muttered Rex to himself, "though I don't know what yet. He must have a surprise uncle who is an Earl, who must just as surprisingly die. He must have been a hero in the war under an assumed name. . . . Now about the scene of the acts. Act I.—The lawn at Hurlingham, or the river at Henley. . . . Lawn at Hurlingham, I think, because that will bring in Lucas Goring and his tennis racket. Everybody there of course. Act II.—Bartholomew's chambers in the Albany. Bartholomews

always live in the Albany. Sitting-room with another sitting-room opening out of it on one side and bedroom on the other. Act III.—The Duchess's boudoir in Bolingbroke House. . . . I'll begin plotting out the second act, because that's where the mix-up comes. . . ."

For three hours Rex scribbled at his scenario, writing and erasing and writing again, planning out his complications and unravelments. The inherent nobility of Bartholomew was the chief motive to hammer at, combined with the awkward situations which were the consequence of his past imprudences. Bartholomew must open the second act, coming in in dress-clothes and telling his servant all that was necessary for the audience to know. Ah! Ah! There could be a surprise or two there. . . . Rex thought of a couple and jotted them down. . . . "A small evening party follows to which the Duchess brings Agatha. This evening party, of course, was Bartholomew's Eve. And the principal painted lady must be called Eve too, for she was also Bartholomew's Eve. Funny, that! People would guess that the evening party was Bartholomew's Eve as well as Venetia Audrey. Bridge goes on in the sitting-room off the stage, so that the stage can instantly be cleared for Bartholomew's love-scene with Agatha, who naturally has not played much bridge in her convent. There is an old friend of Bartholomew's, his General in France, in fact, who knows what he has done in the war but has promised not to say. There is a second pair of lovers who must be worked in, both highly respectable and comic. . . . The party is on the point of dispersing with thanks for such a pleasant evening, when Bartholomew's most particular painted lady, Eve (with the widowed mother), enters, having mistaken the night. Indignant dispersal of the respectable.

Then, oh what a wonderful surprise to follow." . . . That necessitated certain hints of preparation in the first act. He made certain notes. . . .

Rex was immersed in his job. However tawdry the material, there was need of his utmost technical skill in the grouping of it; however stereotyped the characters, they must be conveyed in smart incisive speech; the clever ones, four of them, must squirt epigrams at each other, as from an inexhaustible syphon, the minor characters who constituted the evening party must all be brilliantly idiotic, while the three simple serious souls, Agatha, the General and the servant, must employ that far more limited vocabulary which comes from the heart and not the head. Bartholomew must be bilingual, he must firework with the best of them when gay, and rival the others in conventual simplicity when talking to Agatha. . . . Rex jotted down an epigram or two for the Duchess and the painted lady, but in the main he was occupied with the scaffolding that preceded construction. He did not hear the muffled creaking from the lift, nor yet Oliver's entrance, and once again Oliver burst in upon him, and found him lost to all but his occupation. But this time a face vacantly radiant looked up at him.

"Hullo, Oliver!" said Rex. "What on earth—— Good Lord, yes, we're dining together."

"Nothing wrong?" asked Oliver, remembering an exactly identical situation.

Rex jumped up.

"Wrong?" he said gaily. "Yes, all wrong from beginning to end. I've chucked my play. I've chucked all that seriousness, and I'm writing the most awful claptrap ever invented. It's perfectly sickening, and I believe I can do it. She's the reason of it really."

"Mrs. Winton?" asked Oliver.

"Yes, of course. Dora, the adorable. I saw her to-day at the Ritz, she and a nice young chap—chap, that's just what he was—with a beautiful tie and collar, all decked out for sacrifice. I saw in a minute what was happening: he was my successor—of course there may have been others in between—and he was just on the boil. So I stopped by her table as I went out, and she held out her hand which I didn't take, and I said I thought he would be about ripe this evening. I said I'd ring up at ten: that's when it happens. Wasn't I a cad? I loved it."

"And she?" asked Oliver.

"Dunno. I had done my little bit. I went Minting."

"But what has it all got to do with the new play?" asked Oliver.

"Just rebellion. She always thought I could do good work, so I thought I would do rotten work. Oh, quite careful, and ingenious, but rotten. Just to show she was wrong. Also, when I got home, I found that my last play had just been returned. That had something to do with it. Now I must tell you about the new one. Of course I shall parody it, caricature it, as I tell it you, simply because I can't help parodying such stupendous rubbish——"

Rex paused a moment.

"What's the name of that stuff people put in their tea?" he asked.

"Milk," said Oliver.

"No, fool. Oh, saccharine. Frightfully bitter, but if you dilute it it becomes awfully sweet. Just listen and you'll understand. We'll have dinner in a quarter of an hour. I shan't dress. You're beautiful enough for the pair of us."

Rex drew his pages towards him.

"Act two," he began.

"But how on earth can I understand it unless you tell me about the first act?" said Oliver.

"Easily. You can arrive at any moment in this play and understand it all at once. That's the great principle of dramatic lucidity. The first act has been at Hurlingham, and Bartholomew, who is a real prize rotter with a heart of gold—mind the heart of gold—has been gadding about with all the painted ladies, especially Venetia Audrey, whose name is Eve. There's a Duchess with a pure young niece with whom Bartholomew instantly falls in love. You understand now, don't you? Act two. The faithful old servant is arranging Bartholomew's room in the Albany for a small evening party. He also opens a parcel which has just arrived for Bartholomew and finds it contains beautiful honey-coloured pyjamas which he takes to his bedroom. He indulges in an affectionate soliloquy, as all faithful servants do when they're alone, alluding to what the master has done for him, and wishing he wasn't so wild. Enter Bartholomew in dress-clothes and an overcoat. What do you think drops out of his pocket? You'll never guess, so I'll tell you. It's the medal and ribbon of the Victoria Cross which the King has invested him with that very day. None of the friends have the slightest idea of it. You can't guess why they don't know."

"Give it up," said Oliver.

"Because he has won it under an assumed name. Nobody knew what Bartholomew had done during the war, and the Duchess and party had been rather sniffy about him down at Hurlingham. What had happened was that when his faithful servant had been commandeered—

no, conscripted for active service in France, Bartholomew knew that he had something devilish wrong with his inside, and that he would curl up and die at once, if he wasn't shot first, and so had impersonated him, though he was over forty himself, and had become Private Snippet —that's the faithful servant's name—of the second Rutlandshire infantry."

"What did Snippet do? Did he impersonate——"

"Don't be irrelevant. Nobody will know or care. That's not criticism: it's carping. So pseudo-Snippet gets the Victoria Cross, which has been given him this morning, and which he has left in his great-coat pocket. So the audience knows, and the real Snippet and old General Macintyre, who comes in very soon, but has promised not to tell. Bartholomew puts the Victoria Cross in a drawer of his writing-table, saying to Snippet, 'If it hadn't been for you, I should never have got that, Snippet!'"

Rex frowned.

"Of course somebody ought to discover it there," he said, "but I forgot about that. Oh, I think I can manage it. Let it stop there for the present. He gives Snippet a ten-pound note for his sick sister. Emotion. Emboldened by which Snippet says how happy it would make him if his master would marry a sweet young thing, and turn his back on—— Well, he doesn't say what on. That'll be tremendously popular with the pit. They live so correctly themselves and like to see the spread of morals upwards. Yes, you may speak."

"You're despising your audience, Rex," said Oliver. "That's the silliest thing you can do. Somebody said that."

"Oh, any dam' fool could say that," remarked Rex. "But I'm not despising my audience. I'm giving them

what they like. Put a French cook to cater for navvies, and he'll give them beef-steak and suet puddings if he's wise, and wants them to enjoy their dinner. He doesn't despise them for preferring suet to soufflés and muck. . . . So they slobber a bit over that, and Bartholomew sees in the evening paper that the Earl of Middlesex is dead. That's his uncle, who doesn't come into the play except by his death, which puts him out of it, and makes Bartholomew the Earl of Middlesex. But it's too late to put off the evening party now. Snippet alone knew that the Earl is his uncle; I can't tell you why, but when the audience knows, they won't ask why the Duchess didn't know. . . . Then the evening party arrives, and we really get going. There's the Duchess and Agatha; and the Duchess observing with a lorgnette several Raphaels on the walls, says she had no idea that commoners lived in such comparatively well-furnished places. She's almost kind to Bartholomew. Then there's the General, who knows about the V.C. but won't say, and the horrid young man with the tennis racket. No, of course he doesn't bring it to an evening party, but they'll recognize him without that. Don't be a fool. And there's a second pair of lovers, slightly middle-aged and comic. . . . Then of course there's Bridge in the other sitting-room, which enables me to clear and fill the stage exactly as I want.

"Just as they're all in the card-room for a moment, there enters the fell Eve, who has made one of those mistakes so dear to dramatists, and has come for a cosy evening with Bartholomew to-night instead of to-morrow. Snippet tells her there is a party going on, and having no time to retreat, she goes behind the Sheridan-Oscar-Wilde screen just as Bartholomew enters with Agatha from

the card-room. Of course they allude to the screen and go up to it and admire it, and you think they are going to look behind it. Not at all. The great love-scene begins, of which of course Eve-Venetia hears every word. Oh, a wonderful stunt for Bellingham. He says he's led a rotten life, sees now how rotten it is, and what a fool, what a wicked fool he has been and now it's too late. Agatha, overcoming her maidenly confusion, fixes her eyes on the ceiling, and says it is never too late. No more it is, for it's only the second act. Bridge party comes in, Duchess in glorious good-humour because she won four shillings and threepence. She goes to the screen of course, like a pointing dog, and you think because Bartholomew hasn't found Eve, the Duchess won't. So she does. "Eve, good Lord!" says Bartholomew. "Bartholomew's Eve," says somebody else. Bartholomew tries to introduce Eve to the Duchess, who merely stares at her through her lorgnette, and wheels slowly round like an engine on a turn-table. Duchesses on the stage have always some sixth sense, which detects *cocottes*. Eve isn't the sort of woman to be frightened by Duchesses, and while the Duchess looks at Raphaels with her back to her, talks to the others over refreshments and is terribly witty about strawberries and strawberry leaves. Agatha, in an aside to Bartholomew, asks who Eve is, and feels sure there is a great deal of good in her. And then Eve is introduced to Agatha, and without wasting any time says, or rather gulps, how passionately she envies her innocent purity. Eve was once like that herself, odd though it may appear, and she asks Agatha to give her a snowdrop—no, it can't be a snowdrop because it's June—but anyhow some sort of botanical specimen to remember her by. Just as Agatha is doing

this, the Duchess, hissing like a goose, sees whom Agatha is talking to and whirls her out of the room. Agatha, with one backward glance at Bartholomew, exits, followed by the rest of the party."

Rex referred to his scribbled notes.

"So there's Bartholomew, with all his dreams of worthiness and amendment turned into a nightmare, and Eve pensively regarding the botanical specimen. Agatha has gone out of Bartholomew's life for ever, and so, with a Don-Juan-like air, but with oh, such an aching heart, he orders Snippet to bring in a bottle of champagne, and since Eve has unwittingly spoiled his chance of becoming dull and happy, he determines to go back to the old unhappiness which he used to enjoy so very much, and kisses Eve passionately on the mouth. Champagne, I must remind you, on the stage, is a rare and precious liquid, only consumed by the profligate. When anybody says 'Bring me champagne, *a whole bottle*,' it always means that there's some awful wickedness brewing. And then comes a grand surprise, for just as you think he is going to show Eve into his bedroom, and bring out his honey-coloured pyjamas, and something really improper must follow, Eve kisses the snowdrop —no, the white rose of June—and says she hates her life, spills the champagne and bursts into tears. Venetia Audrey cries too beautifully and looks lovelier than ever when she does so, instead of getting frayed round the nose like most women. Between her sobs she manages to inform everybody that she keeps a widowed mother on her tainted earnings, and she doesn't repent no, she doesn't, because her mother has no idea of the origin of the money which keeps her in quails and oysters and all the delicacies which the poor habitually

consume. She will continue to cherish her aged parent, she will, but oh, for the white roses of June, long past. Upon which, of course, Bartholomew mingles his tears with hers, and gives her a large cheque and a chaste salute. 'Go back to your mother,' he says, 'you shall pick the white roses of June, and you will live down the pitiful past. But for me——' So he's left without an Eve or an Agatha or anything at all worth mentioning. And Snippet brings in the honey-coloured pyjamas. Curtain. Ain't that fine? I really believe my mother would like that. How she hated the last play I read her. . . . Oh, let's have dinner. I shall be sick if I take any more of this syrup on an empty stomach."

The third act, Rex explained as they ate, had now practically constructed itself.

"It's inevitable," he said, "which every good third act should be. You can't tell how it's going to end, but when I tell you you will see it couldn't have ended differently. . . . There's the Duchess in her boudoir with Agatha reading fashionable intelligence in the morning paper. She sees the notice of the death of the Earl of Middlesex; the name de Vere rouses unpleasant memories of the night before, and she puts the paper down, and skilfully changing the subject asks Agatha to help her with the list of her guests for her garden-party. They come to the D's—Agatha reads names from a red morocco calling-book, and the Duchess says 'Yes' when she wants somebody asked—and the name of Bartholomew de Vere is passed over in dead silence. Presently Agatha's voice falters and the Duchess says, 'What is the matter, Agatha? Are you unhappy, dear child?' Agatha is, and nestling at the Duchess's bony knee, confesses that she loves Bartholomew. The

Duchess tells her that whether she does or not, she mustn't. A pure young girl from a convent cannot know what sort of a woman it was who came to see him last night, and what it all meant. Agatha says that they taught her at the convent to find good in everybody, and she has found it in Venetia Audrey. The Duchess reminds her that she is in the position of mother to her, and forbids her to find good in Venetia or Bartholomew any more, but turn her attention to the nice young Baronet who is coming to propose to her this morning. In he comes, and the Duchess leaves them together. Then of course she tells him that she has seen him kissing somebody else at Hurlingham. He tries to kiss her, the brute, and at that moment the Duchess comes back. He is instantly dismissed. Agatha, overcome with emotion, goes to lie down, and the General is announced, who has just seen Bartholomew, out of whom he has wormed the fact that he has sent the painted lady back to her mother. Then the General ceases for a moment to be the strong silent man, tells the Duchess the whole story about Bartholomew and the Victoria Cross, and on his behalf asks for her permission to propose to Agatha. Of course the V.C. makes a great deal of difference, and so does the announcement by the footman of the Earl of Middlesex. Agatha is sent for. Curtain."

"Lor'!" said Oliver.

Rex burst out into a fit of laughter.

"Lor' it is, I quite agree. But I'm going to write it. I'm going to do nothing else till I've written it. There's the patent English comedy for you. I shall load it with witty epigrams and slosh. I shall make it neat and crisp beyond compare. I shall . . ."

Rex looked up at Oliver with a dancing eye.

"And best of all, I've got rid of her," he said, "now that I've seen what I saw to-day. She's gone, she's finished. She's a vampire, and she's got those long teeth into somebody else now. I haven't got a glimmer of feeling left for her, now I've seen her with the new man. Lord, how I should like to ring her up at ten, and see if she has brought it off. Perhaps I will."

"You shall do nothing of the kind," said Oliver.

"Oliver, don't contradict me, for that's the very way to make me do it. If you let me alone perhaps I won't. I dare say the time will come when I can really hurt her, not just give her a pin-prick. That will be worth waiting for."

For the next three weeks Rex worked with unhurrying, unceasing diligence at *Bartholomew's Eve*. He gave himself a couple of hours out of doors every day, but the pot bubbling and seething with all the ingenuity he shredded into it, was never off the fire. He wrote and re-wrote the scenario until each forward movement of the action was dovetailed into what preceded and the whole deplorable parquet was joined together without crack or interstice anywhere. He built up his characters with the same unflinching patience, visualizing them to himself and getting familiar with every gesture and movement, before he let them open their mouths at all, and when he began to write he knew them so perfectly that their speech seemed to arise not out of his brain but out of theirs. Most of them were entirely born of his imagination, one of them, Eve, was transcript, and that no difficult one, of things remembered. Speech after speech might have been said by Dora, and many of them actually had been, especially in the scene that closed the second act, where she would not take any champagne and

burst into tears over the thought of her past life. . . . Rex licked his lips as he wrote. "There's nothing so divine as the first blaze of a boy's love. . . ." She surely would remember that, and the irony of the sequel, her contrition at having so often taken it and rubbed the freshness and fervour off it, could hardly escape her. Miss Audrey—he saw Miss Audrey in the part—had pale hair like Dora's: he would suggest to her that fascinating movement of patting it back into place above the ear. She must darken her eyebrows, and for the scene at Hurlingham, June or January, she must have a dark red cloak falling straight from her shoulders, and a thick sable stole. Then there was another dress of Dora's, which, in spite of her assertion that he was gown-blind, he remembered very vividly: that she must wear in the second act. . . . All this was with no view of 'hurting' Dora, in the sense he had spoken of to Oliver; at the most it might happen to be a pin-prick.

He worked late at night till some shutter seemed to rattle down in his brain, and the bright objects inside the window became inaccessible. But when he had got to bed, and stretched himself out, and from sheer mental fatigue fell asleep, that shutter seemed to move an inch or two up again, so that he, outside, caught a glimpse of the things within himself, often strangely distorted, but sometimes ruthlessly clear. In the distortion he would still be continually working, working, working, and Dora would come in to help him. He would read aloud to her, as he had so often done, and the dialogue became nonsense. . . . Or, when he turned the page, in the middle of a sentence, he would find a blank sheet confronting him. Always, and here was the greatest distortion of all, he and Dora were good friends again,

and often in the middle of a reading, they found themselves in Richmond Park, or in Kew, looking at daffodils, with the sense of spring buoyant in bird-song and growing grass. Some piece of him must be awake, for he rebelled so passionately against this false seeing, that he would recall himself sufficiently from the drowsy borderland, and feel his pillows soft beneath his head, and his hate all secure in his heart, and rejoice to know that he was out of her grip. Equally distorted almost was his dream of his father to whom he read his play, and his father disapproved strongly of him and his work, and without transition he was back in his father's study at Roughton, and saw that the tall bookshelves were full of volumes of Ibsen's plays. Then, after this troubling impression was broken by the waking knowledge that his father could interfere with him no more, he would sleep more serenely, and lie out on the beach with Oliver, while somewhere in the sand-dunes was his mother waiting till they were ready for her luncheon-basket. She had packed the sandwiches, it appeared, in the sheets of Rex's rejected plays, and vague nightmare would begin again, as he ran after fluttering leaves, and strove to recover the complete copy. . . .

The play was finished at last and typewritten and corrected and sent off to Mr. Moysey, and Rex came gasping to the surface. He wanted nothing more, just then, than to subside and relax, and off he went to Roughton. . . . Yes, he had been working very hard and he didn't want to talk about it. He believed his mother might like the play, but nothing mattered. . . . Then after a week incontrollable restlessness seized him, and he went back to town.

A note had been left for him by hand, so pseudo-Oliver told him, not half an hour ago, and Rex, back in his rooms again, saw it on the table. He opened it, and there was the printed heading of the Imperial Theatre, and he looked about for the packet which had surely accompanied it. But there was no such packet, and he read what Mr. Moysey had to say.

The words zigzagged before his eyes. He saw the opening "I have read with keen enjoyment the play you have sent me. . . ." Then there was something about Sheridan and wit. . . . Then there was the request that Rex should ring him up without delay. Mr. Moysey had apparently already tried the telephone, and had heard that Rex would be back that afternoon, and this note therefore was the quickest means of reaching him. It was very urgent: Mr. Moysey wanted a new play to come out at the Imperial the week after Christmas, and he had got it. But time was very short, would Rex therefore enter into negotiations at once. Miss Audrey by great good luck was open to an engagement, and so was Mr. Bellingham, for they were together in a play which was smouldering towards extinction and would undoubtedly expire before Christmas.

Chapter XIV

MR. MOYSEY'S ability to 'hustle' had never been so needed, nor had it ever been so successful, and *Bartholomew's Eve* was produced on Boxing night. Rex, when the moment for the rise of the curtain had come, found it impossible to remain in the theatre any longer, and had gone back to his flat to wait for news. All through those three weeks of rehearsal, his spirits had been sinking as if from some deep-seated internal

frost, and now, when from the back of the box where he sat, he looked out on to the full house, dimly glittering through a haze compounded of a slight fog and his own nervousness, he felt his quicksilver congeal into a hard small lump somewhere at the base of his consciousness, as if absolute zero was at length reached. It was not lack of encouragement and appreciation that had produced this glacial effect, for the company generally, and Mr. Moysey in particular, were approaching the dreadful hour with a buoyant optimism, to which a muddled and chaotic final dress rehearsal only seemed to contribute. There had been no 'snap,' no life, no semblance of reality about it, entries and exits went awry, Venetia had a cold, and Bellingham a toothache, the lighting was wrong, the whole performance was of deadly doughiness. Yet somehow Mr. Moysey diagnosed well from that: it was just the thing to pull everybody together. . . .

It failed, however, to pull Rex together, but it was not that so much which disintegrated him, as some sort of death-agony of his own artistic ambitions. There were two alternatives that now confronted him, the first that *Bartholomew's Eve* would have not a success, nor a half-success, but would just expire, wither away with ghastly grins and galvanic efforts from the actors, and rustlings and coughings from the audience. In that case he would have had his chance, and nothing would be left him. He had had high ambitions once, but had failed to get a footing with the work which had been inspired by them, and now, having apostatized, he would have found that his failure in allegiance had brought him the mere husks of contempt. He would have proved himself incompetent to produce either good work or bad. . . . The other alternative was that *Bartholomew's Eve* would be a

success, and somewhere deep in his authentic consciousness he could guess how bitter that honey would be. He would have had his desire, and withal the leanness. Material prosperity would be his, his, too, the knowledge that any manager would now look with a perfectly different eye on his efforts at serious drama, for he would have shown that he possessed the qualities which spelled success. But if *Bartholomew's Eve* succeeded, would he have the moral strength, after that intoxicating draught, to persevere? Once already he had yielded, and that did not promise well for his constancy. Why had he done it? Ludicrously insignificant, a grain of the tiniest mustard-seed had been the cause. It was the reaction of his love and his hate occasioned by the sight of Dora Winton and her new young man at the Ritz one day. She had always urged him to persevere, to stick to what he knew was good, and the fact of that quite definitely had been the cause of his first beginning, in that mere tantrum of antagonism, the sketch of the play whose fate was even now being decided before that packed jury of stalls and dress circle and gallery and pit. There had coincided, to endorse that impulse, the return of his last serious play from Mr. Moysey, but the other was the potent, the decisive factor.

In his brief stay in the house, he had scrutinized the stalls and boxes to see if Dora was there, but had failed to identify her. She was fond of the theatre, and with her Athenian proclivities, as strikingly exemplified in affairs of love, she was a habitual 'first nighter,' for first nights (as well as first moments of blaze) fed her passion for novelty. He was sorry that she should miss Venetia's clothes, and certain little speeches and gestures. Venetia had caught these gestures with wonderful accuracy, and

inimitably produced them. However, if she was not there to-night, she would be sure to see the play before long; even if it was a complete failure, she would go before it was withdrawn, for had she not once suggested going to some such performance just because it was a failure, and so would probably contain something worth serious attention?

The night though foggy was fine, and Rex walked back to Knightsbridge in time to be at home for a telephone message which Oliver had promised to send him at the end of the first and succeeding acts. He must have bought an evening paper, though he could not recollect having done so, for here it was in his hand, as he entered his flat. It all seemed rather remote gibberish, and skimming the columns he came to the announcement among theatrical news that *Bartholomew's Eve* was to be produced that evening, and that seemed remote and unreal too. But immediately afterwards, among small paragraphs, he came to news of a far vivider sort, and read that Mrs. Winton of 23A, Mount Street had undergone an operation and was in a nursing-home in Wimpole Street. . . . He snipped it neatly out with a pair of scissors, and scrawled a note to Leonard, enclosing it. Somehow, he felt that to be rather a good omen. 'Omen of what?' he asked himself. 'Omen of that piffle play taking the fancy of idiots, I suppose. . . .'

Almost immediately the telephone rang. Yes, of course, he was Rex, and in that infinitesimal pause before Oliver began to speak, he knew which of the alternatives he passionately chose. . . . And he had chosen right: the first act had gone excellently: lots of laughter, every one amused and interested. Oliver, apparently had overheard or listened to the conversation of critics in the bar, who said that the dialogue——

Rex cut this short. "Never mind the critics in the bar," he said, "I want to know about the house."

"Come down and see for yourself," said Oliver. "You'll like it. . . ."

So she was in a nursing-home and had had an operation, thought Rex, when Oliver had failed to persuade him. He shrugged his shoulders, for it was only decent to affect the gestures of indifference, but he knew that the announcement had seemed a good omen, and that showed what he really thought about it. He would have liked her to have been at the theatre to-night though: the dress and poses and speeches of Venetia would have been a pleasant memory for her to take to the nursing-home at Wimpole Street. He wondered what the operation was, and how she had borne it. . . . It was odd, wasn't it, that they did not say how she was progressing after it. Usually the patient was 'doing as well as could be expected' or sometimes 'giving cause for grave anxiety. . . .' Rex felt he ought to shrug his shoulders more convincingly, for, indeed, with this waiting for news of his play to occupy his foreboding mind, he did not wish her ill. He was really quite forgetfully and forgivingly indifferent to what happened to her. There were but a few months to pass and it would be a year since they had spent a spring day in Richmond Park, and dined together that night. It really showed a great want of vitality on his part to have let himself go on thinking, for good or ill, about her all these weeks. Hadn't he got the strength to forget that spring day yet? The evening that closed it was another affair: he did not want to forget that. But the day itself, that wholly delightful day: it was strange that its memory should begin asserting itself again.

The telephone summoned him to a wildly excited babble from Mr. Moysey. The second act had been a triumphant success: the principal actors had been recalled again and again and eventually Frank Bellingham had to quell the enthusiasm by explaining that he must change his clothes before the third act, and would keep the audience waiting if they did not let him go. . . . As for the third act, there was no longer any anxiety about it. It was neat and short and just what a thoroughly good-tempered house would like. But it was a great mistake of Rex not to come down to the theatre and make his bow. However, if he would not, he would not. But Mr. Moysey wanted to see him as soon as possible—ah, he could not wait now, for the stage claimed him, but he would ring up in half-an-hour. . . .

Rex promised when, after an interval, Mr. Moysey announced an absolutely unequivocal success, to make no engagement as to future plans till he had seen him, and early next morning while he was still at breakfast the manager bustled into his room. Already the telephone had been busy: hoots of delight had come from Oliver, there were congratulatory messages from all quarters, but best of all to Rex were the respectful inquiries from Mr. Charles Roley and those to whom he had submitted his previous rejected efforts, to know when Mr. Goodwin could make it convenient to see them, with a view to business: perhaps something might be done immediately over the telephone. According to his promise, Rex excused himself from any discussion till he had seen Mr. Moysey, but it presented itself to him as an agreeable device, to deal them out again the trifles they had spurned before, and just see what they would

do now. Mr. Moysey, of course, in common fairness, should have the first choice. . . .

Mr. Moysey brought with him a number of clippings from the morning papers.

" You can look at those when I've gone, Mr. Goodwin," he said. " They're remarkably pleasant, they're absolutely fulsome, but they're perfectly unimportant. Those people who made their hands hot with clapping last night aren't waiting to be told by the critics whether they ought to have enjoyed themselves or not. Mind you, I'm not underrating the critics : they're very useful people. If the first night is just a decent moderate success, they can turn it into a real success by praising it : all the theatre-goers who weren't there and attend to what the critics say will go to it, and you'll have a run of some sort. Equally, they can make a frost. But after a night like last night, they are powerless. All the audience will tell their friends that they *must* go to see *Bartholomew's Eve.* London will be talking about it and you for days to come. So it's all right. Now what about you ? "

" Oh, thanks, I'm all right," said Rex. " Rather tired of answering the telephone."

" Of course. Half the managers in London have rung you up already. Naturally."

Since Mr. Moysey's entrance, Rex had already gone twice to the instrument, and now he was summoned again. This time it was a trunk-call from Manchester, and he had an enquiry about provincial companies. He said he could make no arrangements for the present, at which Mr. Moysey audibly chuckled.

" Wide-awake fellow at the Queen's Theatre," he said. " He wiped my eye once. Can't you disconnect

yourself, Mr. Goodwin, while we have our talk?"

This was done: pseudo-Oliver was told to take down any messages that came through, but to say that Rex was out.

"That's better," said Mr. Moysey. "Now we can talk without interruption. Unless I'm utterly mistaken, Mr. Goodwin, we're in for a long run. The play's all right, as I said, but what about your plans?"

Rex finished his breakfast, and went to the drawer where his rejected efforts reposed. There they were, three of them complete, written and rewritten with all the enthusiasm and skill and conviction which he could bring to them; the fourth, which had reached the big scene in the last act, dangling incomplete, with an unfinished sentence, just as he had left it when he had bundled it into the drawer, and begun work on *Bartholomew's Eve*. He glanced at the last page of it before he answered Mr. Moysey and how the words clutched at him! They had been distilled from him, drop by drop; yet even while he recognized their vividness and their sincerity, they receded from him like hulks on a far beach and between them and him stretched the sundering shining waters of his success. Yet that very success, so he instantly saw, would carry him in his boat across to them. He could launch them now.

"Look here, Mr. Moysey," he said, holding up the substantial packet. "Here are three plays I have already written, and a fourth that won't take long to finish. One of them, the third, you've seen already: not many weeks ago you talked to me about it, and though you refused it, you wrote most encouragingly. Would you like to read it again, and talk business about it? If you don't care to, I shall offer it elsewhere. I think somebody would take it now."

Mr. Moysey made a pleasant gurgle of assent.

"Of course somebody would," he said. "Of course anybody would. Of course I would, if you insist, so very kindly, on offering it to me. I have no need at all to read it again. I remember about it perfectly. But before we get to that, I ask you, my dear Mr. Goodwin, to listen to a few remarks from me. You may think them worth your attention or you may not, but in any case you will recognize that they come from a man who has made a very considerable fortune over theatrical business. I have made mistakes in the plays I have produced or have refused to produce, but not very many of them. My success has been entirely due to the fact that I have made good guesses—they are not guesses really—at what the public likes, and, what is not less important, from whom it likes it. Mark those words, Mr. Goodwin, 'from whom it likes it.'"

The temptation to whistle just a bar or two of 'Jerusalem the Golden' was almost irresistible. But if Mr. Moysey didn't know the tune it would be so flat, and if he did, it would be so rude. . . . So Mr. Moysey continued unaccompanied.

"I don't think you quite realize yet what the success of last night means to you," he said. "Supposing we put on at once a second play by you, and that the play was the one you so kindly offered me before, every one would flock to see it, because it was by the author of *Bartholomew's Eve*. And whatever were its merits—it has a great many—they would be bitterly disappointed and feel themselves defrauded. Not all, I grant you: the intelligent ones would probably enjoy it very much, and no doubt many of the critics would congratulate you on your pungent and cynical drama. If you are

content with that, good. But you must remember that by producing the play of which we are speaking, you will pull down a great piece of that fairy palace—I tell you it is no less than that—which was built for you last night. Produce three plays—I think you said you had two more complete, and one nearly so—which are of the same *genre* as that one, and you will raze it level with the ground."

Rex was listening with extreme attention by this time.

"That may be so," he said, "but isn't it possible that by producing them, I may—to use your term—have built another fairy palace?"

Mr. Moysey laughed and shook a negative finger.

"I can tell you without any qualification that there will be no second fairy palace," he said. "Fairies don't build for anybody twice. You may raise a rather forbidding sort of tenement dwelling, quite solid and weather-proof, so that you will always have a certain audience and a respectful Press who will praise your *tranches de vie* —for so they will certainly call them—and recommend the whole world to see your cynical and clear-sighted productions. But that is quite uncertain: you may do it or you may not. I admired, but I would not touch such a play as you sent me before by an unknown author, though now, as it is by you, I will take it, and produce it, and do my best with it. I shall not lose money: a play by you, even of that sort, is for the moment safe enough. But in a year's time, it is highly improbable that I would produce another of them, especially if there have been several like it in the interval."

He got up with florid gesticulations.

"Do you remember what I said just now?" he asked. "I said I knew what the public likes and from whom it likes it. What it likes from you is not a cynical, dis-

heartening exposure of human nature. Don't you see that, Mr. Goodwin? You might give me an excellent play on such lines, but the public doesn't want it from you. What it now expects from you is that inimitable mixture of wit and sentiment, and——"

"And slosh," suggested Rex.

"Slosh, if you like, and incomparable neatness of handling. You have taken an old threadbare set of situations, and a set of *banal* characters, such as the public loves, and furbished up the tatters, and washed the faces of the characters, and made a new thing of it all by your inimitable wit and lightness. What do you want to go harrying people for, you bloodthirsty young man, and making them uncomfortable and miserable, when you can divert them like that, and make a fortune for yourself as you do it?"

Mr. Moysey, in spite of his opulent fur coat, and his white spats, his little pointed imperial beard and his large cigar, had suddenly assumed something of the inspiration of one of the prophets of his race in this improvisation of the duty and opportunities of the budding dramatist. He flung his great-coat off, for he was perspiring, and his intense earnestness lifted him as by some transfiguration high above all touch of the absurd. He went on with inconceivable vivacity and eloquence.

"And you don't know a tithe of what you've done," he said. "Come down to-night to the theatre, though I don't know how we shall get a seat for you, and find out what it feels like to have the house rocking with laughter at your wit, and sobbing over your slosh, and then perhaps you'll think twice about beginning to wreck your fairy palace. You don't know what it looks like yet: you only saw it with the scaffolding up, and the plumbers and decorators at work. The Royal box

has been ordered for to-night, if you like that sort of thing, and there are to be four arm-chairs, and the Prime Minister's secretary rang up, and told me he wanted three seats, and not one can he have. He must wait till to-morrow to hear Mr. Goodwin's play. They'll call you to make your appearance at the end, after every act, too, I expect, and you'll see what it's like to have everybody smiling and bubbling at you across the footlights. And it'll be the same over again, I back my reputation, if you'll take your pen in your hand and give me another play with the quality of what you've produced now. You were nobody yesterday, but at the moment you're the most talked about young man in London, as the writer of brilliant comedy. You've made your footing, but you've got to consolidate it. Write half a dozen plays like *Bartholomew's Eve*, and you will do it. And then, if you please, you can turn your attention to what you consider to be worth while writing. But if you value at all what came to you last night, don't start throwing it away just yet. Make the most of it: it won't come twice, and then when you've pulled a fortune and a great reputation out of it, let it go adrift. But, anyhow, learn what it means first. I assure you I say these things for your own sake as well as for mine. I don't in the least underrate what you can do for me, it would be damned nonsense if I did, and wouldn't deceive you. You can put a great deal of money into my pocket, and I like money: you can give me more control over the dramatic world, and I like control, for there's not an actor in London who wouldn't gladly take an engagement in a second comedy by you. On the other hand, I am talking also in your interest. You will throw away much of what you gained last night if you now produce

plays like the one you sent to me. It is not my opinion. I know it. I am not arguing, I am telling you. . . . Again, though it was great luck for me that you sent me *Bartholomew's Eve*, it was great luck for you that it was to me you sent it. I had the sense to see that if it was to have the chance of great success, the principal parts must all be taken by stars who in the eye of the public are the incarnation of certain parts. That means a very large payment for salaries, as you can guess, and it was a good thing for you that I did not funk that. I don't anticipate getting much out of the London production, I don't indeed, but I shall make a very large sum out of travelling provincial companies : and out of American rights : the *cachet* which the huge London success has given the play ensures that. And you will make a very large sum, too."

Mr. Moysey paused and mopped his face. His cigar, only a quarter smoked, had gone out, and he threw it into the fireplace.

"I think I've put it all fairly before you now," he said, "and we can come to business. I propose to start a provincial company off on tour as soon as I can get it together. That is provided for in our agreement. Cables about the American production will come in in the course of the next day or two. We will talk about the American business when they arrive. Now about this evening ? I hope you will come and see your play. You shall have a seat somewhere or other. By the way, I shall at once reduce the pit, and put in some extra rows of stalls. Now this evening : won't you dine with me first ? "

"Yes, I should like to," said Rex.

"Good : you will see what success means. I hope you will take your call. They are sure to call for you : to-night will be like another first night. It is a sensation

you ought not to miss. Now for the business that really matters. I want you at once to write another play for me of the same *genre* as *Bartholomew's Eve.* We need not define *genre,* I think—you know as well as I do what it means. Shall we say a thousand pounds on account of royalties? Your royalties will naturally be on a higher scale."

Rex knew that he had made his choice long before the definite proposal had been made him, and his acceptance sent Mr. Moysey back into his fur-coat with his object accomplished. For one instant, as the lift rumbled and wheezed with his descent, Rex had the impulse to run after him downstairs and say he had reconsidered his assent, and would write no more *Bartholomew's Eves,* but even as the impulse seized him, he knew it was still-born, dead in the moment of its conception. He had chosen, and his choice now was the inevitable sequel of the impulse which made him originally write the play.

Success had come, and he knew, as now he sat staring at the fire, that it had come at a price. In his clear-headed knowledge of himself, he did not attempt to assure himself that when, as that very shrewd Mr. Moysey had suggested, he had made his position secure, he would turn his back on the production of such skilled facile rubbish as this, and devote his abilities to writing what his own verdict approved. The first bewildering draught of success had already made him hold out the glass for more, and each taste, he made no doubt, would confirm his craving. And he had scarcely tasted it yet: one sip had been sufficient to make him call for a second dose when this was finished: surely in all the pharmacopœia there was no drug that so quickly established itself. Yes: it was just that, a drug of potency so overpowering that already he might just as well, so he suspected, toss

the contents of that drawer, full to the top of careful considered work, into the fire, as keep them for the time when he should be in a position to bend the tastes of others to his own. . . . That day would never come, because already he had relaxed those taut bands of desire which alone could bring it. Already once he had devoted all that his mind held of wit and technique and construction to produce work which he thoroughly despised, and now he had chosen to repeat that performance rather than turn his back on his own betrayal of himself. He could not (nobody could) continue to falsify his talents with the object of one day employing them truly again. He would cease to want to do so: already by his own choice he had preferred to use them differently.

But he had got to use them, and that with as ungrudging a service as ever before. All that he had learned in his work and study hitherto must be employed with no less ardour. Having once set himself to write *Bartholomew's Eve*, he had used in it all the cunning of stagecraft that was his, had weighed phrase with phrase to add wit and piquancy to his dialogue, in an angry ecstasy of prostitution. It was just that, and now decking his brain afresh, he was sending it out again to display itself at the street corners.

Well, it was idle to harp like this on the bitterness of success: the far more sensible behaviour was to enjoy the sweets of it, and sweet it was, even as Mr. Moysey had told him, to hear the packed theatre burst into ripples and shouts of laughter and audibly gulp at the appropriate lines of pathos. Behind the scenes, no less than in front, he was the darling of the hour, and at the end he had to appear with mixed assortments of the company, until it was clear that he must come forth through the

parted curtains and take a call alone. He bowed to the house, and said a few words, neatly and appositely, quoting out of Bartholomew's most successful lines, and applying it to himself, and so it was over. . . .

He went out into the windy street, still bewildered, still headily intoxicated, and then suddenly came the deadly sobriety of reaction. That was what his dreams had ended in, that vapid tawdry little comedy, which reaction itself had made him write. . . . And Dora was in the nursing-home, after an operation, and he under the windy stars was now revelling in the success which was the fruit of his defiance of her, now tasting nothing but the bitterness of it. He would so enjoy, if it was possible, explaining to her just how it was the impulse of hate towards her which had burgeoned into this. . . .

That day in Richmond Park last spring, when she was like a shadow of a cloud bowling along over sunny spaces . . . Whatever had followed, she had been just like that, the adorable swift mind of her, blue and mysterious, breaking at the edges into brightness. And the adorable slim body of her, with the quick gestures. One in particular which Venetia had caught so amazingly well. . . .

Rex had not neglected among all the emotions of the day to send a telegram to his mother, announcing prodigious success, and demanding her immediate presence in London, in order to see it. Her reply was waiting for him when he got home ; she whooped (like Oliver) with congratulations, and would come up the very next day. There was a bedroom for her at his flat, and a box at his service at the theatre, and a motor to take them out to dine, and on to the play. He asked no one else : it was her treat, and he knew that she would enjoy

it infinitely more with him alone than if anyone shared him with her. Between the acts they got no private word together; Oliver joined them for one interval, and Rex was urgently required to see Mr. Moysey in the second, for two managers in New York were inquiring for American rights. America, said Mr. Moysey, was always a toss-up; they would always jump at a play which had been a great success in London, but it by no means followed that it would be a success there. America, apart from slosh which it adored, had a curious taste for stuff not exactly rotten, but rancid. It was wise therefore to ask a very considerable sum on account of royalties, in case Rex proved not to have caught the correct rancidity. Then there were the film rights to be considered, and then—good Lord, there was the bell for the last act already. The last act wanted watching: good as it was, it was a little too short. It would bear more Duchess-Agatha talk at the beginning. Padding? No, certainly not padding, but more of that contrast between the two women. Would Rex consider it? And Venetia was being a little difficult, she didn't like not appearing in the last act. . . . Couldn't Rex give her a few more snappy lines in the first act?

It was not then till his mother and he had purred off from the theatre, that in the darkness of the motor, she slid her hand into his.

"Oh, Rex, my dear, what am I to say?" she said. "How I enjoyed it! The wit and the gaiety of it. And didn't it go to my heart to hear the peals of laughter, and to know that it was your delicious humour that set the house in a roar! And how moved they were at the end of the second act! What a lovely sensation it must

be to know that you are controlling the emotions of that great packed house. . . ."

Rex laughed aloud. He knew his mother so unerringly well: he could detect in her eager voice just what she did not say. So he said it for her.

"And how wonderfully cheap you thought it?" he remarked.

"No, my darling, no," she began. And then with a welling-up of that delicious childlike quality of hers, "You mustn't say that, or think it. And I am enjoying myself so much. Don't let's discuss: I discussed a play with you before, and it was a great mistake. . . . I am so happy in your happiness, my dear; that's enough. And so proud of you. I wanted to get up and stand at the front of the box, and shout out 'I'm Rex Goodwin's mother. I am indeed . . . .'"

Some glimpse of that wonderful love, just a gleam of its white ray pencilled its way across him, like the steady beam from a lighthouse. Though it wrapped him round in its radiance, and he could soak himself in it, it was still an enigma. He could not reach the essence of it, some stubbornness of egoism still stood between him and it.

He could respond, anyhow, to that childlike appeal through which it vibrated.

"And you shall be happy, my dear," he said. "And you are my mother! Oh, why didn't you do just that, and shout that you were. You would have had a huge success. They'd have taken the horses out of your carriage, or rather the carburettor or whatever it is out of your car, and dragged you home. Here we are at home, anyhow. Now you're not going to say that it's eleven, and time for you to go to bed."

It was not conceivable that she should say anything of the sort. She had Rex to herself, and he was kind and affectionate and in his most entrancing mood, and she interpreted all his affection and eager talk into tokens of his love for her. Even as her husband had been, so, too, was he always reticent about his deeper feelings and emotions, and she did not expect any expression of them. He was like that, she told herself, and however voluble, was essentially silent. How like him, for instance, was the manner in which he probed her financial affairs. . . .

"We've got to talk about that," he said. "Do you know that I'm rich, and that money will pour in? And I'm living on you. I haven't earned a penny of my own till this week. But of course that mustn't be any longer. It must be retrospective, too."

"Retrospective?" she asked.

"Yes. I must pay you back all you've given me this last year."

"Oh, Rex, please not that," she said.

Rex laughed.

"Now why? Tell me exactly why!" he said. "I imitated you then, mother; you so often say, 'Tell me exactly why?' when I've made some profound observation."

She tried to turn the question aside.

"Oh, mine wasn't a profound observation," she said.

"Well then, it was a shallow one. But why?"

That swift sensitive smile lit her face.

"As if you didn't know that!" she said. "As if you didn't know it was the sweetest privilege to me to give you all I could. Rex, don't make me take it back. It would spoil my fun."

"Well, if you answer one or two questions satisfactorily,

perhaps I won't. Now don't you keep a servant or two less than you used to ? "

" It so happens that I do. But naturally I don't want as many as when your father was alive."

" And what has happened to your emerald brooch ? " asked Rex.

" Oh, I never wear it."

" You didn't happen to sell it ? " he asked.

She gave up at the pertinence of that, and again the lighthouse beam swept across him.

" My darling, and what a joy it was to do so," she said, " when I wanted the money for you. How could I endure keeping the silly thing, when it was capable of giving me such enormous pleasure. It was a purely selfish joy, and I loved it."

" Very selfish," said Rex. " Horribly selfish. You must learn better, you know. I think a small cheque might teach you. . . . Now about the play for a minute. I'll tell you what I think, if you won't tell me what you think. It's all bad ; it's all wrong from beginning to end. It's not sincere : it's not anything. And I'm pledged to do another of the same sort. Isn't it awful ? And after that I shall do another. Ever since I left Cambridge I've been writing serious plays, you know, and nobody would take them. So I came down to this. I don't know that it matters. I could probably never have done anything good."

The tender trouble came into her face, taking the place of that childlike enjoyment with which she had left the theatre. But she would not now wish it back, for Rex wanted something from her, not advice, not the criticism he had asked for then, but comprehension, the entering into his feelings, and here love rushed to meet

his demand. But she knew she must use that fine tact of love, which does not push and pry, but only shows itself with a signal of welcome.

"Ah, you could do such fine things," she said. "You've got it all in you. You want, you need——"

Rex looked at her.

"Tell me what I need," he said.

Somehow, it required all her courage to speak. Love had to walk so circumspectly, to be infinitely careful of trespass. Love was not enough: love had to be trained in ways of wisdom, like any other gift of God.

"I will say all my thought," she said. "I'm not talking about this play, though it illustrates what I mean; I'm talking about you. Of course you could do something good. But what you need, my darling, is deepening. You must see through the oddities and queernesses and faults of people, and find the lovely things that lie below. You dwell on the surface of them—and there you're delicious—but when you come to talk of great things, like the woman in your play giving up her bad life, and trying to be pure and innocent again, you don't get to the heart of it. It doesn't ring true. And in order to get to the heart of things, you must feel deeply yourself, you must open yourself up, turn the ground far below your cleverness and your wit, and your habit of dwelling on the weaknesses and failings of others. . . . Oh, my dear, I wish you would fall in love."

Rex had seated himself on the hearth-rug, with his back leaning against her knees before she began to speak. But at this last sentence he sat upright again, severing himself.

"Ah, don't wish that for me," he said, "I've had enough of that."

He picked up the poker, stabbing at the fire.

"I want to ask you something," he said. "When I was down at Roughton with Oliver last Easter, and when I was there with you in the summer, was I hopelessly disagreeable and impossible? More so than usual, I mean?"

"You were very much depressed," she said. "I knew there was trouble. I knew there was something wrong."

"You put it very kindly," he said. "I see we mean the same thing. Good Lord, if you could stand me then, there's nothing you wouldn't stand from me."

She had an air of quiet consideration for this. That was much wiser than tender assurances.

"Let me think now," she said. "No, on reflection, Rex, I don't think there is anything I wouldn't stand from you."

He settled himself back against her knees again, smiling in spite of himself.

"And yet you never once asked me what was the matter," he observed.

"Never," she said.

"Well, I'll tell you, and that will also tell you why I don't want to fall in love again. I've done it once, and she encouraged me to it, she meant me to do so. There was no doubt about that: she admitted it. And when I told her that I loved her, what do you think she did? She just mocked me. She adored the first blaze of a boy's passion. That was what she wanted, it—it tickled her. She had got it, and she licked her lips, and was through with it. 'For what I have received . . . .'"

There was no reply. Her hand just dwelt on his shoulder, pressing it. The quiet steadfastness of it made him speak, though probably a word or a question would have silenced him. The gesture brought her closer than the voice.

"And then she had the insolence to suggest that we should still be friends," he said. "I wasn't taking much of that, and when I saw her next, casually, she had another ardent young man whom she was fanning to blaze for her. Vampire, you know. And that was what made me write that rot we've been seeing together. She knew I could write something finer, if I would only stick to it, and that was what really determined me not to stick to it. There were other things as well; a play had been refused and came back to me, but ludicrous as it sounds, it was my hate and contempt of her that made me throw up all my ambitions. She had fostered and encouraged them."

He heard a little sigh behind him.

"Oh, my dear, how small of you," she said, "and how shallow of you, and how natural of you."

"Quite so," he said. "I am small and shallow. I know that well enough. You've told me so yourself."

"No, Rex, that isn't fair," she said. "I told you you must deepen yourself."

"Yes, because I'm shallow."

"No. Because you've got the deeps in you. Because you're not shallow. You've got to reach them. And there's only one way, and that's by love."

Rex was silent: then he shifted himself sideways, so that he saw her face, and the brimming eyes and the tremulous mouth.

"And I've given you a beast of a time after all," he said, "though I did mean it to be happy for you."

And then her love broke down all the barriers that her wisdom had thought good to erect in it, and she smothered the face that was as dear as the love of God to her with caressing hands, and long-dwelling lips.

"As if you hadn't given me the greatest happiness of all!" she said. "Rex, all this last year I've been longing and yearning for you to come to me with your trouble and your unhappiness, and I can't have made myself worthy of it, for you didn't come. . . . All the time I hungered for a share in it. And I couldn't ask you: you can't ask one whom you love, as I love you, for a gift so priceless as that. Don't you see, my dear, that I couldn't? I can ask you to let me share in your joys and pleasures: I can show I'm greedy for them, but I can't ask you to show your woes, until you want to. . . . Oh, think of it, and what it means to me! I came up here just to share your success and your triumph, and, my darling, you've given me something so infinitely dearer to me. Rex, I shall try to be worthy of it, so that you'll come to me again when you're miserable. . . .

"Get rid of hate," she said. "Don't try to turn it out exactly, because then it will come back. But sow a new crop over it. Compassion, Rex, and the love from which compassion springs. If you once loved this woman, that is the seed to sow there. . . . And come to me, my dear, please, please come to me when you're unhappy and bitter. Don't leave me out. . . ."

Chapter XV

MRS. GOODWIN went back next day to Norfolk, full of surmises and doubts and fears as to her wisdom, about a certain decision she had made and told him of. She believed she had been right, but she could not feel sure, she prayed that she had been right, but no great reassurance of her own heart answered her. Rex had seen her off at King's Cross, had bundled her

into a first-class carriage instead of a third, and had brought her back the receipt for the excess fare. It was delightful of him, but so unnecessary ; still she made herself extremely comfortable for his sake. . . .

It was so natural and inevitable to love, but if that meant being of the children of light, it had to be remembered that the children of light were not always wise. And with Rex, what a terrible lot of wisdom was necessary ! Had he been hurt by that decision of hers this morning, when he made his entrancing proposition to her reminding her that this was what they had planned ever so long ago ? Certainly she remembered it : they had agreed that when he scored a success, she should live with him in London, sumptuously and splendidly, and he should have another home down at Roughton.

It was this he had reminded her of, saying—bless him —that he would look about at once for a house or a flat which should suit them. And then she had told him that it wouldn't do. He did not want her really, as she accounted ' wanting.' It was a pleasant plan, a fulfilment of their scheme, but—but——

He wasn't hurt, she might dismiss that, not really hurt. Her refusal, anyhow, of this proposal, she felt, had not hurt him with the same aching as it had cost her to refuse it. And part of that ache, the most human and intimate part of all, was that he did not want her in such a way as made it possible for her to accept. . . .

She had known that before really : it had been abundantly clear in that month which Rex had spent with her after his father's death, that she could not be his constant and permanent companion, always there when he got up in the morning, and always snoring—as she put it—in a neighbouring chamber when he went to bed

at night. Of course she could make him comfortable, and take the cares of housekeeping off his hands, but with what loss of proper liberty for him! What young man could want a middle-aged female, whatever his affection or filiality, pouring out tea for him in the morning, and waiting up for him at night, or with greater tact going to bed? It was not natural, especially for one who like Rex had so much of the wild in him. . . . He did not really, essentially want her, it would have been a miracle if he had, and there was no such miracle. . . . Yet it made her ache to refuse, more so than before when the experiment, on his initiative, had been tried down at Roughton. For last night he had come closer to her than perhaps ever before, when he opened out his bitterness and hate to her, and that made her refusal the sorer to herself. But even then, he had not really sought her: he had burst—poor dear—and she happened to be there. . . .

She was alone in her carriage, and busied herself for a little in producing the maximum comfort for herself with a rug for her knees, and her bag with a book and a paper occupying the seat next her, for it was the enjoyment of Rex's gift of the excess fare that gave honey to these small arrangements. There was a looking-glass let into a panel of the carriage, with coloured photographs of Peterborough Cathedral and the beach at Skegness, and the cliffs of Cromer, and she regarded herself with humorous depreciation as she passed it.

"Well, I've spared him the sight of that every morning behind the teapot," she said to herself, and a shrewd kindly face smiled approval at her. Mothers wanted their sons, she thought, in a way that no son could want his mother, and any decent mother wanted her sons to want someone else so infinitely more than herself. . . .

Her thoughts slid away to what Rex had told her. She had not asked who the woman was, but she believed she knew. His story seemed the sequel of his friendship with Mrs. Winton, whose name, she had noticed, had not passed Rex's lips. In any case she did not want to think about her at all. Rex had fallen in love with her, and had been treated with some ghastly inhumanity, and so the woman did not concern her. What mattered was how Rex was taking it, what was the behaviour of his spirit under it, and he was taking it all wrong. He had talked to her a little more this morning, had scoffed and wondered at himself for letting the memory of that spring day in Richmond Park dwell in his consciousness, whereas it was just in letting it dwell there, and living over the sweetness of it, that his salvation lay. But he would not have it: out went that desperate chin of his, and he said "No: I shall keep on turning it out, till I've forgotten it. Don't you see I'm trying to poison it with my contempt of her, and that's the way I shall kill it. . . ." She was in a nursing-home, he had also told her, after an operation, and he confessed that he glanced at the paragraphs of Deaths in *The Times* every morning. . . . That was a heartache worse than the other. Rex could do so much better than that. He wasn't hard and bitter like that all through. . . . Just for a moment last night, when she made him see how precious to her were his miseries, he had softened. He had seen, from afar, and had come nearer. Then, beautiful wild fierce creature that he was, he had wheeled off again, as if shy of approaching the love that called to him, as if fearing that love would capture him. . . . Why, the whole reason of being was to be love's captive, so fast in that prison that escape was impossible. . . .

She knew she was idealizing him, but how, if you loved anybody, could you fail to do that? What Rex could be, was more really he than what he so often was, that parody of himself, which her love refused to recognize as him. There was no surer way of calling the worst out of anyone than that of taking their worst as being their true selves; no surer way of bringing out the best, than by only accepting that as being true of them. . . . But her heart bled for him in his bitter prosperity, and yearned after him in his unhappiness. All the pleasures which were ready to answer his beckoning, weighed light compared with a single ounce of happiness, and he could not be happy with that millstone of hate round his neck, that drowned him in deep and bitter waters. But he had to unloosen that burden himself: it was only from within that he could get freedom.

Rex wasted no time in setting to work on the new play for which he had so opulently contracted. The thing had got to be done: he had sold his soul, and the sooner he began making the due deliveries of the goods the better. But the sale was not paid for financially only: as a sort of bonus there had been thrown in a social distinction, and the lion-hunters of London were roaring after their prey. He had emerged from the huddled rank of presentable young men, and had become a peak, and the climbers of London instantly set out on numerous expeditions for the ascent. If they secured him, they made a bait of him to entice to their hospitable houses other desirable diners. Mrs. Mint was pre-eminent among these amiable folk: she started the amazing legend that she had discovered Rex, and let it be understood that he consulted her on all dramatic matters, and had

read to her, act by act, the play which had made his name. It was all very ludicrous, but amusing, and certainly useful, for there were many little studies to be made of modern and ephemeral types, the froth with its empty iridescence, the butterflies that flitted about in the sunshine. They were just what he wanted now, for he was a trafficker no longer in the dark places of the soul, and its desires and entanglements, but an observer of its whims and a parodist of its morals. Of course there was more sentiment and slosh to be invented, but it would be a great mistake to dig deep for that, for if you dug deep you brought up unmarketable stuff with the taint of reality about it. It would never do to bring that pungency into his play: people would hold their noses, instead of blowing them. . . . And all the time as he planned his tawdry stuff and wrote down little epigrammatic cynicisms to be worked in, he had some gnawing interior hunger for what was real, and what touched or wrung the heart, or fed it with bread, bitter or sweet. There precisely was the price he paid.

He was deep in his work one afternoon, when Oliver dropped in.

"Tinkle, tinkle, tinkle!" he cried, "I'm getting on beautifully, Oliver, with the new toy symphony. Now where's that slip of paper? Ah! Listen, what Roland says —Roland's very smart. 'Women are utterly unaccountable,' says Roland, 'and that's why men pay their accounts for them.' It doesn't mean anything, does it, but it sounds as if it might. So all the clever people think they see what it means and laugh. I've sold my soul, Oliver, and am doing it up in foolscap paper. Roland might say that: no, I think we'll give it to somebody else. Then Roland——"

Rex put down his pen, shut his blotting-book on his sheets, and gave a loud groan.

"My mind hurts me," he said. "What do you do when your mind hurts? 'Never mind,' said Roland. Loud laughter. I'm going to call the new play *Gammon and Spinach.* I haven't seen you for days. Why have you come here now? Have some tea. Have a drink. O Lord, what rot!"

Rex got out of his chair, and stretched himself, feeling the atmosphere of his play evaporate.

"My mother only stopped up for one night," he said, "and, oh, how cheap she thought the play, and how right she was. And she won't come and live with me in London. I asked her. I didn't mind really, though I tried to persuade myself that I was hurt. I didn't succeed. And I told her about Dora, though without names. That was my idea of giving her a pleasant evening."

"I bet you did, then," said Oliver.

Rex stood in front of him, stark and uncompromising.

"Now, why do you say that?" he asked.

"Because it must have been so. You told her. . . . Never mind, don't let us talk about that. Now this evening: the Mint has asked me to dine. To meet you, too. There's glory for me. . . ."

There was the creaking from the lift just outside the door, and pseudo-Oliver entered with a note. There was no envelope to it: it was just a sheet of paper folded into itself, and without address.

"Immediate, sir," he said. "There's a taxi waiting for you below."

"Oh, am I to go somewhere?" said Rex, and opened it.

There were only a few lines, faintly scrawled in pencil,

and he took it over to the window to read it. It was in a hand he knew.

"Will you come and see me, Rex?" it ran. "I have had a second operation, and I can't live. Please come, Rex.—Dora."

Rex's frown at the difficult decipherment faded, as he puzzled it out. His face flushed, his eye sparkled.

"Listen to this," he said to Oliver, and read it him. "And there's a taxi waiting to take me," he said. "A taxi to take me! She's settled it all. She just whistles to me, and I come to her, do I?"

He went to the table, and scribbled below the pencilled words:

"So sorry. Very full of engagements.—R. Goodwin."

He folded the sheet back into its original creases, and gave it to the servant.

"Take that to the bearer who brought the note," he said.

Oliver got up.

"Oh, Rex, go, go," he said. "How can you not?"

Rex came close to him.

"How can I not?" he said. "Are you mad? Don't you see that I have to make an effort not to go? There's a decency to be observed. If I went, I should look at her, and smile at her, and say 'There!' She wants to be friends again, I suppose. Or does she want to try to see just one more blaze of a boy's love? Something to light her on her way? A viaticum: is that it? And she would put her hand up to her head, and pat her hair, and I should just mock at her. . . ."

"She's dying, Rex," said Oliver. If that meant nothing. . . .

Rex shrugged his shoulders.

"That's all I can do," he said. "When I think what

she did for me, how can I manage more than struggle up to utter indifference ? "

His voice rose suddenly.

" You don't seem to see that I'm trying not to care," he cried. " I do care really : I'm glad she's dying, and I'm glad she sent for me so that I can refuse to go. Why should I love her all of a sudden, because she's dying ? She'll be out of it in a few hours now, and where shall I be ? In the hell of it still, while she's in Abraham's bosom. It's she who should give me the drop of water, not the other way round. I haven't got any water for her. . . . Why didn't she write, if she was going to write at all, and say ' Rex, try to forget me,' instead of ' Rex, come to me.' "

The passion of his hate swirled about him.

" ' Please, Rex, come to me,' " he whined. " By God, I think I'll go after all. I can't miss it. . . . It'll deepen me perhaps, just what my mother says I want. I'll telephone, revoking my note and saying that I'm coming instead. Yes : I'll go and see her. Get out of the way, Oliver. I want to telephone. I'm coming, I'll say. Just that. I'll let her see me, if she so much wants to. Perhaps the next little fellow will be there, too, that one at the Ritz. . . ."

As he went, Rex thought of what he meant to do. Probably they would not give him long with her. . . . After all, he would not want long. There would be no need of speech, he only needed just to see her, to let her see him, stony and smiling and indifferent. . . . There was indeed no need to think what he would do. Just his presence there would suffice.

He was expected, and was at once admitted and taken upstairs. There was a faint rather sickly smell hanging

about the passage: ether, no doubt. The nurse who took him up was a pleasant dimpled woman, cheerful in demeanour.

"Yes. Number Sixteen," she said. "On the first floor. . . . Will you leave your coat?"

She tapped at the door, and it was opened. And the nurse inside came out into the passage.

"Mr. Goodwin, is it?" she asked. "Your note arrived just before your telephone message. Mrs. Winton had read your reply that you couldn't come, and it upset her terribly. But now she knows you're coming: she is expecting you."

The nurse who had brought him to the door looked at him eagerly.

"Not the Mr. Goodwin who wrote *Bartholomew's Eve*?" she asked. "It is? Why, I went to see it last night. How pleased I am to have seen the author of such a lovely play." She slid off down the passage.

"About Mrs. Winton?" asked Rex of the other.

"Ever since her operation yesterday she's been wanting to see you," she said. "We thought she wouldn't live through the morning to-day. But she kept saying she had to see you, and yet she couldn't make up her mind to ask you. Will you come in now? She wants to see you alone, but I shall be just outside here in the passage."

There was a tall screen to the right of the door as he entered. That was where the bed must be, just behind it. . . . What was he going to do?

He had thought about that as he came, but what conclusion had he come to? He meant to look at her, to let her see him, and then go.

And there was her face directly fronting him. She was lying high, propped up with pillows.

"Oh, Rex," she said, and she raised her hand to her head, and pressed down the hair above her ear.

There she was, her face not white, not ill, but delicately flushed, as with the wind of spring. Just thus had she looked . . .

He took a step to the side of her bed, and he heard his voice say:

"Why, this will never do, Dora!"

She did not look ill, but far off. . . . As he spoke her eyes smiled at him.

"No, it's rotten, isn't it?" she said. "Sit down, Rex. I've something to say to you."

He turned to draw a chair up to her bedside, and remembered why he had come. Just to look at her, and let her see he was glad there was an end of her, and then go. There was to be a rather jolly party to-night. . . . But though his intention was all clear to him again now, it seemed remote, quite clear, but remote.

He sat down by her, and now that he looked at her again she had come closer. The smile had sunk away from her eyes.

"Rex, will you forgive me?" she said. "I want to die so much, and I can't without that. It's terrible enough to die anyhow, but it's much more terrible. . . . Your face and your hatred, oh, so just, will haunt me for ever. . . . Rex, don't be just with me. . . ."

The intentions with which he had come were more remote now, but they were still visible. Perhaps he could shut his eyes to them for a moment. He began to speak, but she stopped him.

"Of all the vile things I have done," she said, "the vilest and most cruel of all was what I did to you. I believe you might forgive me if you knew how sorry I

was. . . . And there was only one way in which I can show you that is true. . . . I want to save you from a death like mine. . . . I've laughed at love: plucked it, and smelt it, and thrown it away to wither. Rex, don't be like me. . . . Rex, I am sorry. . . . "

What had he come here for, after all? Surely not on some incredible errand of ruthless and pursuing hate? That was out of sight now: it was visible no longer. Instead some anguish of compassion seized and wrenched him; no soft sentimental pity, but pain fierce and blinding. Nor for her alone was it, but for such as himself, who used love for their pleasure or profit.

He shut his eyes under that stroke, and when he lifted them again she was looking at him in some tense agony of expectation. Her hand lay on the bedclothes, and he put it within his.

"Yes, yes," he said. "How can you ask? And I came here, did you guess that, not meaning to do anything but hate you and mock and leave you. And I can't. If you'll accept forgiveness from such a brute, why, it's yours. And even if you don't accept it, it's yours just the same."

He felt her hand stir in his, pressing the palm of it. But that tense agony faded from her eyes, and something tranquil and shadow-like came over them. And her mouth? Did it smile below the shadow that lay across it?

For a little while she said nothing, and the shadow deepened.

"It will be spring once again," she whispered. "Richmond Park, do you remember? The shadow of clouds . . . Rex . . . you have forgiven me, haven't you. . . . Really, I mean, utterly? . . ."

"You know I have," he said.

Again the shadow deepened; he was sure now that she smiled. She raised her head and gasped for breath, still looking at him, still smiling. And then it fell back on her pillows, and her hand, still in his, relaxed its pressure.

Chapter XVI

THERE was thick fog next morning in London: it was just such a day as that, a year ago, on which Rex had decided that it was no use attempting to get to the station and go down to Roughton. But this morning he made the attempt, and caught his train with half a minute to spare. He had made up his mind if he missed it to motor down.

Crawling and stopping, with endless detonation of fog-signals, the train emerged into the still winter sunshine. There had been a frost, for the rime lay in strips of white heraldry under shadow of the black leaflessness of the hedgerows, and silvered the twigs of the bare trees. Before long it yielded to the warmth of the sun; there was even a hint of spring in the air.

Rex's thoughts moved like some slow current below ice, dim and veiled and sundered from his surface-consciousness. He looked at them, as if from outside, and far above the cold transparency that enveloped them: they were like pictures of familiar things, not the things themselves. There was one of Richmond Park on a spring day: another of the flat in Mount Street: another of a room in a nursing-home in Wimpole Street. One thing alone was quite real and certain, and that was more an instinct than a reasoned thought. The ice that covered

them must be melted: that was why he was on his way to Roughton.

There had been a moment yesterday—it had lasted a few seconds only—of such tortured happiness as he had never known. It was when compassion had poured in on him, and he had forgiven not her alone but himself. But immediately afterwards it had passed, for the end came, and it was too late. All, at present, that he could hold on to, was that he had experienced it, and that for that ultimate moment she had understood. But now it was somewhere below that ice, and what in heaven or earth could melt it? It was so thick: it was frozen hatred and lovelessness, and it was of his own making, the busy manufacture of years. When love had been given him, he had always used it, making some sort of profit from it, and there was a frost not easily uncongealed. He had always seen the worst in everybody, sought out their faults and failings and had dwelt on them, pickling them with ridicule and dislike. And supremely he had hated and warmed himself at his hate, and there was the Arctic night itself. . . .

He had forgotten to telegraph to his mother, and his advent would be quite unexpected. He was close to the end of his journey when he remembered it; it was two o'clock, and in London there would be a queue at the pit-door of the Imperial Theatre, waiting for it to be opened for the matinée performance. It would just be on the move now: doors were opened at two, and they would stream in to look and laugh and snivel . . . Oliver was going with a Mint party, and in Wimpole Street . . .

The salt freshness from the sea saluted him as he got out at Holt. There were a couple of taxis in the yard outside, and presently he was sliding down the long hill

towards Roughton. Then the ground mounted again, and there from the final rise, he saw the shimmering levels of the marsh, and the long headland with the sand-dunes at the end, and the dim mother-blue of the sea. Close at hand the red roofs of the village huddled and sunned themselves, and now there was but the steep paved street to traverse, which opened on to the quay by the gate of his mother's house. . . . What would he say to her when he reached home, how account for his coming? He had no idea at all: he did not arrive, as he had arrived yesterday at Wimpole Street, with a hot, burning purpose. Some instinct, the gnawing hunger of remorse had made him come, and he had given no thought to anything else.

She heard the wheels crunching the gravel, and she started up from the table where at this moment she was writing to him, with some strange stab of certainty at her heart. She hurried to the door, and there was Rex on the threshold. He looked at her, grave and unsmiling, and then with a wooden jerk his hands went out towards her.

"I had to come," he said. "I wanted you."

She was with him, her hands in his.

"Oh, my son, my son," she said. "What is it?"

He tried to speak, but for the trembling of his mouth he could form no word. Then that strong soft grasp of hers steadied him.

"I wanted you," he repeated.

Printed in Great Britain by Butler & Tanner Ltd., *Frome and London*